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PC PowerPlay

AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

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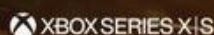
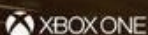
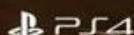
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“PAINKILLER HAS GOT ME AND A LOT OF THE PC GAMER TEAM EXCITED”



BEN MANSILL

This month

Beseeched Lord Gaben to forgive console gamers for their heretical activities and guide them away from damnation and towards the salvation of the one true PC gaming faith. Amen.



The original *Painkiller* was the very definition of a cult classic, with adrenaline-inducing FPS action partnered with buckets of artistic flair, mature themes and, in the Stakegun, one of gaming's best ever weapons. Simply put, it offered a unique experience that you couldn't get anywhere else, even in triple-A rivals, at the time.

Which is why Anshar Studios' new, reimagined *Painkiller*, has got me and a lot of the PC PowerPlay team so excited, as it looks to be building on the series' legacy in some fresh and unique ways. So, lock and load the Stakegun once again, as the hordes of Hell are calling.

BEN MANSILL
EDITOR

ben.mansill@futurenet.com

The PC PowerPlay team



FRASER BROWN

This month

Needed to correct his new subjects' grammar. It's 'Romani ite domum', not 'Romanes eunt domus'.



IAN EVENDEN

This month

Became Bath's raffish Beef Baron, secretly smuggling in steaks under the nose of lawman Rex Banner.



JOSHUA WOLENS

This month

Built a colossal factory staffed by a million tiny robots. It's output? Whoopee cushions.



JACOB RIDLEY

This month

Built a collar from CPU fans that dramatically blows air through his hair at all times. Vogue!

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Fraser Brown wears the purple in order to colonise antiquity his way. And the good news is, despite civil unrest and his economy collapsing, Anno 117 is shaping up very well.

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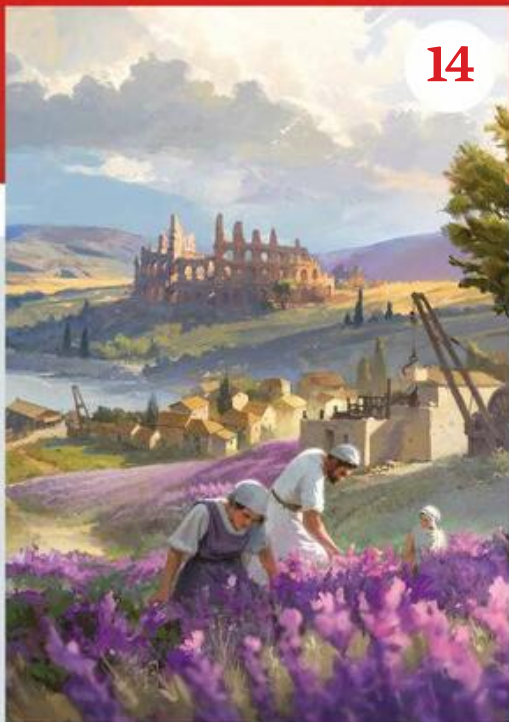
Dominic Tarason dives into the cinematic 19th-century world of Eriksholm: The Stolen Dream, and finds plenty of stealthy hijinx and classy high-end period drama.

38 PAINKILLER

Rick Lane grabs his Stakegun and fights for his salvation in Anshar Studios' radical reimaging of the classic FPS. And, what's more, this time he does it with co-op enabled.

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PC STAYS WINNING

NINTENDO can brick your Switch; I've never been happier to be a PC gamer

Nintendo has changed its online user agreement in multiple consumer-unfriendly ways just before the launch of the Switch 2. Chief among them: Nintendo asserts the right to render your console “permanently unusable” if it determines you’re in violation of the agreement.

No game or hardware modding, no extracting ROMs – something Nintendo asserts we cannot do, even though it is a legally protected consumer right in some countries – and no dual booting to another OS.

I’m getting a clear message: you spent \$766 on this hardware, but Nintendo does not think you own it.

There are plenty of legitimate reasons to jailbreak or modify a console, or extract a ROM from a game you own: many original Switch games run better via PC emulation than on the original console, and

**I WANT TO MODIFY
AND BE ABLE TO
USE THE HARDWARE
I PURCHASE**

Nintendo is only just catching up to that capability with the Switch 2’s potentially compromised backwards-compatibility.

Even more pressing is the inevitable discontinuation of online services, like we saw recently with the 3DS and Wii U. Just before that was finalised, Nintendo pushed an update to 3DS consoles which made them harder to jailbreak.

This is also something that makes Nintendo’s subscription-based access to its classic games library all the more galling to me, and in Nintendo’s new EULA update, it now explicitly warns that it may discontinue its online services. In the face of such

CORPORATE CONFLATION

CURSED TO CORRECT



At this year's Computex keynote, Nvidia's CEO said, "PC gaming is now 30 years old," implying it's all thanks to "how incredible GeForce is". This narrow history excises *Doom*, never mind the fact Mr Huang himself could likely lead a lecture on how PC gaming was born on an oscilloscope. ■ **JK**

ADDONS, OFF

NO MORE WEAKAURAS



WoW's going to be slowly phasing out its user-made combat addons – and it's causing a bit of a hullabaloo. Speaking to PCPP's Heather Newman, game director Ion Hazzikostas says he wants to "narrow the gap" between the AddOn-havers and the have-nots, while shoring up the game's own UI. ■ **HR**



YEEHAW

SADDLE UP, PARTNER



For the first time since the game came out, *Minecraft* is introducing the ability to craft saddles from leather and iron. Before now, we had to hope and pray that we'd find one in a chest or reel one in while fishing. But those days are long gone. ■ **KP**



TOP: Do you think this is mentioned in the welcome tour?

ABOVE: Donkey Kong is perplexed by Nintendo's EULA antics.

unreliability, user modification of a device to ensure it remains fully functional is a perfectly reasonable solution.

It's hard not to feel like Nintendo – in fact, all three console manufacturers – has well and truly left behind the plug-and-play 'it just works' convenience that used to set it apart from PCs. A change in the wording of the EULA for minors that places responsibility on their legal guardians seems designed to further head off embarrassing lawsuits, ensuring such cases are forced into arbitration. Nintendo also joins in an unfortunate trend we can't even escape on PC: explicitly spelling out that we do not own our games, and instead only 'licence' them.

That last embarrassment aside, these odious impositions are a big part of why I'm a desktop and Steam Deck-exclusive gamer at this point. I want to understand, modify and be able to use the hardware I purchase for as long as I see fit, not be beholden to the proprietary services of a notoriously consumer-unfriendly company.

Sure, Microsoft keeps trying to push AI nonsense, but Linux gaming only keeps getting better thanks to SteamOS – if things get bad enough, I'll make the move. I still love the original Nintendo Switch, but everything I've learned about its follow-up makes me think the 2017 hybrid console was lightning in a bottle. ■

Ted Litchfield

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Scroll up

The project to remake *Morrowind* in *Skyrim* just got a progress update.

Aw, rats

The gigantic rats you have to kill in so many RPGs are real – they're 85cm long and called subalpine woolly rats.

Wicked wikis

Indie *Fallout* wiki joins forces with the Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages, ensuring a bright future for RPG lore.

A load of Sith

Lucasfilm declared creative bankruptcy with an AI-generated Star Wars film.

Now you see me

An *Apex Legends* writer got laid off 24 hours after the character she wrote was revealed.

Life is a battlefield

The *Battlefield* community's good vibes nosedived after Dice announced there'll be no class weapon restrictions in *Battlefield 6*.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, The Spy tried the whole 'Sith' thing, once. Korriban was nice enough if you like hot climates, which The Spy does, and there's no doubt that the brutalist architecture of the Sith Academy makes for some dramatic Insta snaps, all art deco lines and distressed stone. The wielding of dark force powers to do mischief was also a jazz, like that one time when The Spy force blasted Darth Jar-Jar into a Shyrack nest to the applause of all Sith Academy initiates.

But the thing with the Sith is that, eventually, they're going to revert to form and go full Sith. Like, The Spy likes the Sith, but they can kinda be too Sith, right? All the powerplays, backstabbing and attempted murder don't half put a crimp on things, and especially so when the Sith Civil War breaking out led to The Spy trying to stay vertical while dodging a lot of pale, self-obsessed, whiners. Why didn't my daddy love me more? I'm angry! Why can't I cheat death and live forever? I'm angry! As you can imagine, The Spy soon booked it out of there and lay low while things blew over on a pleasant planet hidden away in the deepest parts of the Outer Rim.

THE REVAN-ANT

Since then The Spy has abandoned the whole Sith thing, but has grown more powerful than you can possibly imagine when it comes round to sensing disturbances in the videogame industry Force, being able to detect even the smallest ripples of hidden activity in it from a far distance.

Enter *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic Remake*, the long-desired reconstruction of what many PC gamers consider to be the best *Star Wars* game ever made, as well as one of the finest RPGs to grace gaming systems, too. Following the saga behind this remake has been trying, almost as much as having to watch the terrible Sequel Trilogy while being told about how superior it is to the Prequel Trilogy by individuals who clearly haven't experienced the height of *Star Wars* storytelling, which funnily enough is to be found in *KOTOR* and its sequel.



THE SPY

The Spy plays Pazaak exclusively in hives of scum and villainy.



Following an official teaser trailer for the game being released a long time ago (2021) and in a galaxy far, far away (a PlayStation Showcase), it was announced that Aspyr studio was bringing the remake to life, but then a year later the game was 'delayed indefinitely' and disappeared without a trace. It was then revealed that the remake had been taken off Aspyr and handed to Saber Interactive by its parent company, Embracer Group. But then in 2024 Embracer Group sold off Saber Interactive to Beacon Interactive. Meanwhile, the only *KOTOR* update gamers got was a generic confirmation from Saber's CCO Tim Willits that, as of March 2025, all of the studio's projects were still being worked on.

Dark times, then. However, The Spy can feel that things are afoot and that balance will indeed return to the good *Star Wars* games pantheon. The *KOTOR Remake* has not passed from this world, but lingers still, shrouded from view as a revenant of a previous gaming age made new. The Spy feels that an epochal moment is advancing, one that will mark the order of PC gaming forever. Spy out. ■
The Spy

A YEAR LATER THE GAME WAS 'DELAYED INDEFINITELY'



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BLUE SHIFT

How **BLUE'S NEWS** stayed alive and evaded 'enshittification' for 30 years

You've been feeling it too, haven't you? You try to scroll on a website and the ads crowd out the text so thoroughly you have to reload. You want a short guide for collectibles in a new RPG, but beneath Google's flat-out wrong AI summary there's only a parade of bloated videos. Pressures to survive in the attention economy have turned countless websites into labyrinths of engagement and monetisation tactics. This spectre of quality decay – this 'enshittification' as it was dubbed by journalist Cory Doctorow – extends to just about any service that exists in proximity to capital.

Perhaps that's why Stephen 'Blue' Heaslip's site Blue's News is such a stable time capsule of the quaint, uncynical frontier the early internet is remembered as. Created to platform Heaslip's hobby writing in the '90s, the site was never about money. It was about something timeless, human and more primordial: *Quake* hype.

"I was very into *Doom*," Heaslip says, with a sort of timeworn fondness that betrays he is very much still into *Doom*. "I emulated some of what I'd seen people doing to follow *Doom* and *Quake* was about to come, so I created a *Quake* website. I was interested in experimenting with html... I did it on an impulse."

That impulse came and went in 1996, but nearly 30 years later, Blue's News persists as a general PC gaming and tech outlet with minimal changes since its inception. Today, Blue's social media tagline tracks its response to the shifting media world at its flanks, "No AI slop, no sponsored posts. Sorry, not sorry."

It's pure function and no filler; as the storm of enshittification rages, Blue's News is an unsullied flag planted in a landscape increasingly dominated by fewer and fewer parent companies. And for Heaslip, that's the point. "Sometimes I question, you know, what am I doing here? There are all these much bigger corporate websites that dwarf my reach and all that. But it's sort of nice to feel like you're helping stem the tide or digging in against enshittification. The world's going to enshittify around me, I'm not gonna stop it, but I can try and revel in something that used to be better."

BLUE STREAK

Refusing to jump in with sensationalist headlines or touchy op-eds is a steelier commitment than it might sound. It's cynical to think of journalism through the lens of attention-getting and controversy, but sites live and die by how much they are read – and what's neutral to one set of eyes is indistinct to another, easily passed over for more tantalising reads.



Post host

With over a billion site views since its inception and hundreds of thousands of news stories under its belt (94% of which have been written by Blue himself), Blue's News' legacy is more than longevity. It's unparalleled consistency. The site has only gone 22 days without at least one post since July of 1996. That's a 99.8% hit rate.

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FAR LEFT: Shortly after the turn of the millennium, the site landed on an aesthetic that has lasted for decades.

LEFT: Blue at QuakeCon 1998. (Left to right) Sean 'Redwood' Martin, Stephen 'Blue' Heaslip, Robert 'Rob's' Selitto and 'Esses'.

LOGOMOTIVE *The shifting aesthetics of a '90s PC gaming news site*



QUAKE-UP
Blue's News' first masthead still proudly celebrated *Quake*; the game's logo would remain in use on the site for years.



SIMPLE AND CLEAN
The site's first original logo was small and simple, a concession made to cut down on load times.



HEARTFELT
Soon enough, the site's gag logos would become a tradition, and one that persists to this day every April Fools.



GAME CHANGER
Readers will catch the temporary game crossover logo. The site's archived them all the way back to *Unreal*.

Heaslip isn't blind to this pressure, he says, and recalled that it was what first pushed the site to outgrow its *Quake* blog origins. When a list went up online comparing different *Quake* websites' traffic stats, he noticed, "Not that many people are coming to my website. Like, why would that be?"

That was the first time he thought of his site as something to foster and develop. With an up-and-running site and no prior experience writing news, it took some figuring out. "I had to learn as I went along what being a journalist was, I was kind of like a glorified forum poster. At one point Microsoft did something and I abbreviated their name as MS\$. Which is a funny 'forum dude' thing to do, but somebody came back at me and said, 'Listen, you need to be more objective'. It was kind of like a slap in the face, and I was like OK, I get it: people have an expectation of fairness."

Those growing pains helped Heaslip identify a set of standards that guide the site's voice to this day, "I don't disallow myself editorial comments, but I feel like I want to be like the Greek chorus. I want to say the thing that everybody is thinking. It became my mission to be more fair and more objective."

OLD BUT GOLD

In 1996, Heaslip's favourite game was *Doom* (you can find his maps on Doomworld). He'd just gotten engaged to his fiancée, known online by the handle MrsBlue. He posted dozens of PC gaming news stories daily.

In 2025, Heaslip posts dozens of PC gaming news stories daily. Last year was his site's busiest yet for posts, clocking in at 12,313 stories. He's celebrating 29 years with MrsBlue. *Doom* is still a favourite, though he gives due props to *Portal* and *Half-Life 2*. And yes, you can still find his custom maps on Doomworld.

When Heaslip broke his arm in a car accident in 2021, he continued to pump out articles using his free hand and voice recognition software. When a representative from MTV approached him in the '90s about buying out the site, he shrugged it off and stayed the course.

Blue's News doesn't live in showstopping release coverage, explosive view counts, or burning criticism of big-name games. Nothing so boom and bust. It lives in every small moment captured and sent out to a remarkably loyal niche. As much as Mr Blue gives to the site on a daily basis, it's what he gets back with every upload that keeps him going. "At certain points, I can't say why I continued. The world evolved and a lot of external money came into a lot of websites. It was just very difficult for me to continue to compete for everybody's eyeballs with the rise of other websites," he says.

"What had once been a bigger deal started to diminish a bit, but I really started to learn that I was getting something out of it myself besides financial success. The act of [writing], the relationship with the readers, staying in the flow of the news, it all suits me very well. In the end, I get a lot out of doing it."

Justin Wagner

**LAST YEAR
WAS HIS SITE'S
BUSIEST YET
FOR POSTS**

SAPPHIRE



AMD
RADEON
RX 9070 XT

AMD
RADEON
RX 9070



SAPPHIRE

NITRO+



Anno 117: Pax Romana



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Mainz

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

LINK
tinyurl.com/hm3hdj4u

ANNO 117: PAX ROMANA

An epic strategy game and city builder with a big toga to fill

I do not typically recommend completely tanking a city's economy, potentially ruining the lives of all of its citizens and being heralded as a complete idiot, as a way to learn a valuable lesson. But this is exactly what happened to me in *Anno 117: Pax Romana*, and I came out the other side really vibing with the direction Ubisoft is taking it in interesting ways.

The latest entry in the long-running city building series has been kicked back to the golden age of the Roman Empire, but as I began my first foray into colonising antiquity, it didn't feel a million miles away from my sojourn as a governor in *Anno 1800*. Everything from the moment-to-moment city-building to the broad structure of establishing a small, sustainable colony before setting off across the ocean to exploit more resources felt incredibly familiar, despite the gulf between the two eras.

This familiarity did make the establishment of my first colony nice and straightforward, of course, as I followed the missions doled out by my mentor. I briskly constructed a slew of production chains across the island, feeding my citizens' desire for the basic necessities and expanding relentlessly. If you've played *Anno 1800*, you'll find getting started pretty effortless.

The good news is that this sense of over-familiarity was short-lived. *Anno 117* is not a table-flipping sequel full of endless experimentation, but from the four hours I spent playing it, the game messes around

with the setting in fun ways and shakes things up just enough that the Roman Empire feels like a new frontier.

EXPENSIVE HABITS

It all clicked when my economy collapsed. The early campaign missions are designed to get your first colony up and running and mostly self-sufficient, and being very aware that I had limited time, I was trying to smash through it, rapidly expanding without letting my economy stabilise. So I'd been running a deficit for a while. And then I just completely ran out of cash, prompting the game to question my suitability for the job. There was an obvious solution. My warehouses were bursting with goods I could put up for sale, allowing my rivals to gobble them up, netting me a chunk of cash. But I wanted to have a nice, stable colony that didn't need to rely solely on trade to survive.

Rearranging my colony, then, proved to be the solution to my economic woes. This is where *Anno 117*'s building bonuses came into play, which make city building feel even more tantalisingly puzzle-like. Simply placing a bakery within a dense residential area immediately increased the income generated by the entire area, though like a lot of buildings, it came with a trade-off: baking all that bread also increased the likelihood of a fire breaking out.

With all these different bonuses and negative effects, often you'll have to decide if happiness or profit are more important for you at that moment. If a civil revolt is looming, and you don't have the peacekeeping infrastructure to handle it, pissing people off isn't going to be the smart play. But if your coffers are dwindling, that quick cash injection is going to look pretty seductive.

When you couple this with other location-based mechanics, like the limited range of storage buildings and the need for resource-generating buildings to be placed within specific areas, the layout of your city becomes a top priority – even more so than in *1800*. Building bonuses are especially relevant to research. Some buildings generate knowledge from their sphere of influence, which can then be spent in a meaty research menu divided into economic, civil and military trees. Discoveries run the gamut from bonuses

PLAYED
IT

**OFTEN YOU'LL HAVE TO DECIDE
IF HAPPINESS OR PROFIT ARE
MORE IMPORTANT FOR YOU**

Anno 117: Pax Romana

✱ for specific buildings, to substantial upgrades, to enhanced ships.

Also significant is the addition of deities. The gods of *Anno 117* are not going to be showing up and flexing their muscles, but their impact is much greater.

DIVINE INTERVENTION

With the ocean playing such a big role in *Anno 117*, you might want to make Neptune your patron deity, as dedicating yourself to the big lad will, over time, earn you helpful bonuses, including increasing the swiftness of your naval vessels. There's an entire religious progression system built into the game, with the belief your colonies generate fuelling it.

A religious building like a sanctuary, for instance, generates both happiness and belief within its area of effect, and it's through this resource that you can start accessing your chosen god's handy bonuses. You can also switch deities – and not just to Roman ones. The Romans were extremely pragmatic when it came to religion, and players are encouraged to carry on this tradition.

I wasn't able to mess with the Celts in my playthrough, but Ubisoft did tease what we'll be able to expect when we can expand our reach to new lands. While you'll still be playing as a Roman governor, bringing with you Roman inventions, you'll still be able to let your Celtic citizens maintain their original identity rather than squashing their culture.

Expanding north means new flavour, new resources, new buildings – which will still be present even if you choose to focus on the Romanisation of your far-flung colonies. The choices you make about what culture to promote or what god to worship don't take place in a vacuum, either. Your citizens will have some thoughts about your plans, as will other characters, like your rival governors.

From time to time you'll also receive requests from other governors, or your citizens will need you to resolve a dispute, like some workers who are not particularly satisfied with their terrible boss. In that case, you might compensate them for ill-treatment and appoint a new overseer, which will cost you some cash but give you a timed bonus to happiness. Or you could

just embrace a life of corruption and take a bribe to look the other way.

After a few hours, my previous economic woes were a distant memory. Sure, sometimes I got into the red, but only briefly, the result of some big projects, and between trading and bonuses I always had a way out of any hole I'd dug myself into. I also had a bunch of different colonies, along with an internal trading network that shipped goods from my primary colony to my new ones.

WATER PARK

As I approached the end of my Roman holiday, I finally got to start my first massive engineering project: the aqueduct. These bring fresh water to your colonies from the mountains and can be used to help stop your settlements from turning into a pile of singed timber, improve your agricultural industry and will become necessary for certain public buildings.

Constructing one is a big undertaking that requires a vast amount of resources, and to be honest I did find it a touch fiddly, especially when the aqueduct intersected with my roads. But it was also exciting to embark upon a meaty engineering challenge like this – like my colony was all grown up. And while I couldn't go any further, it hinted at a turning point – like embracing the Industrial Revolution in 1800 – with a whole set of new challenges and objectives. There was one other major new feature that Ubisoft wasn't ready to show off: land battles. Wars are no longer exclusively conducted by navies, so there's this whole mini-RTS layer that exists inside this city builder.

I'm yet to find a convincing reason for cramming military conflicts into a city builder, and while *Anno 117* might change this, it's a relief to know that this is all optional. By tweaking the settings you can just focus on the city building, and even if you keep the default settings, your AI rivals are actually pretty friendly.

Anno 117 won't be launching until the end of the year, but these first few hours have the polished gleam of a game that's already out. It's quite the looker, too, with city streets bursting with tiny details and lively energy. And it's already so easy to lose yourself in all these production chains, engineering projects and trade ventures. With *Anno 1800* as its foundation, alongside all these tweaks, twists and dense Roman flavour, I've got high hopes.

Fraser Brown



The ocean plays a big role in *Anno 117*.



FROM TIME TO TIME YOU'LL ALSO RECEIVE REQUESTS FROM OTHER GOVERNORS



ABOVE: Distant colonies will have their own opinions on your Romanisation efforts and gods.

LEFT: Military conflicts are part of *Anno 117*. But if you just want to build and trade then you can turn them off.

Blacksmith Master



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 15

DEVELOPER
Untitled Studio

PUBLISHER
Hooded Horse

LINK
hoodedhorse.com

BLACKSMITH MASTER

Who knew working hammer and tongs could feel so relaxing?

Cosy isn't the word I'd usually reach for when discussing the hot and sweaty labour that comes with running a medieval forge. But even in its Early Access form, *Blacksmith Master's* unlikely combination of hard metalwork and decorative drapes brings a pleasantly relaxing vibe to all that smelting and hammering.

My little workshop's comfortably nestled inside an established town, and bustles with activity from dawn to dusk. One blacksmith saws wood while another assembles a sickle at a workbench. An assistant might be hauling ore into my workshop while another lugs a sack of goods over to a merchant waiting by their cart.

Being able to keep track of a dozen different moving parts just by looking over the workshop floor is more than helpful, it makes it easy to believe my business is one part of a wider community. I'm not making a bunch of gauges fill up for no other reason than because I'm supposed to, I'm trading with local merchants and supplying the townsfolk with well-crafted goods.

Building my business is a breeze. Clean snap-to-grid behaviour combined with a clear UI makes placing everything from essential anvils to pretty pot plants simple, even when working across multiple floors in the middle of a busy day.

And if (OK, when) I mess up, rearranging and rotating the existing furniture is as simple as dragging it about

while the shop menu's open, allowing me to quickly correct my routinely appalling layout choices – or just dress up the shop I opened to sell my goods with another tasteful wall basket for fun.

FORGING AHEAD

Before long I've got a functional workshop filled with its own stories. I made the effort to give my designers a quiet area in a corner of the upper floor, and paid for a torch just because I thought my lumberjack's camp looked a bit sparse without it. Watching another harried assistant rush about all over the place because of my frankly terrible item chest placement makes me smile.

Most of the time I'm assigning individual workers sensible tasks from an easily accessed short list of jobs and letting them get on with it. Maybe one of them's a talented carpenter, so I'll make sure they always prioritise wood-related jobs. I'll ask others to create the most expensive items first, or focus on fulfilling merchant orders. I have to keep an eye on things, but my burgeoning blacksmith business won't fall apart the instant I relax.

New skills, abilities, and even areas are introduced at a gentle pace; an interesting new problem to work into my existing and ever-expanding routine, rather than another damned chore piled on top of everything else. The game wants to help. We're a team, and we're going to make this blacksmith's work – together.

It doesn't feel like busywork, not even when dozens of workers are trying to fulfil triple-digit orders just to keep the place going. I can see clearly how all of these systems interconnect and rely on each other. And because I can get in so close and watch these lovely low-poly people dip hot iron into cold water, it always feels like a very personal sort of success. My team is working hard, together, and coming out on top.

There's still some work to be done here before it's all buffed to a bright finish – I'd like to see some need for specialism, such a reason to organise my shop space so the pots and pans customers don't rub elbows with the bow and blade customers – but even in its Early Access release, this is pretty hot stuff.

Kerry Brunskill



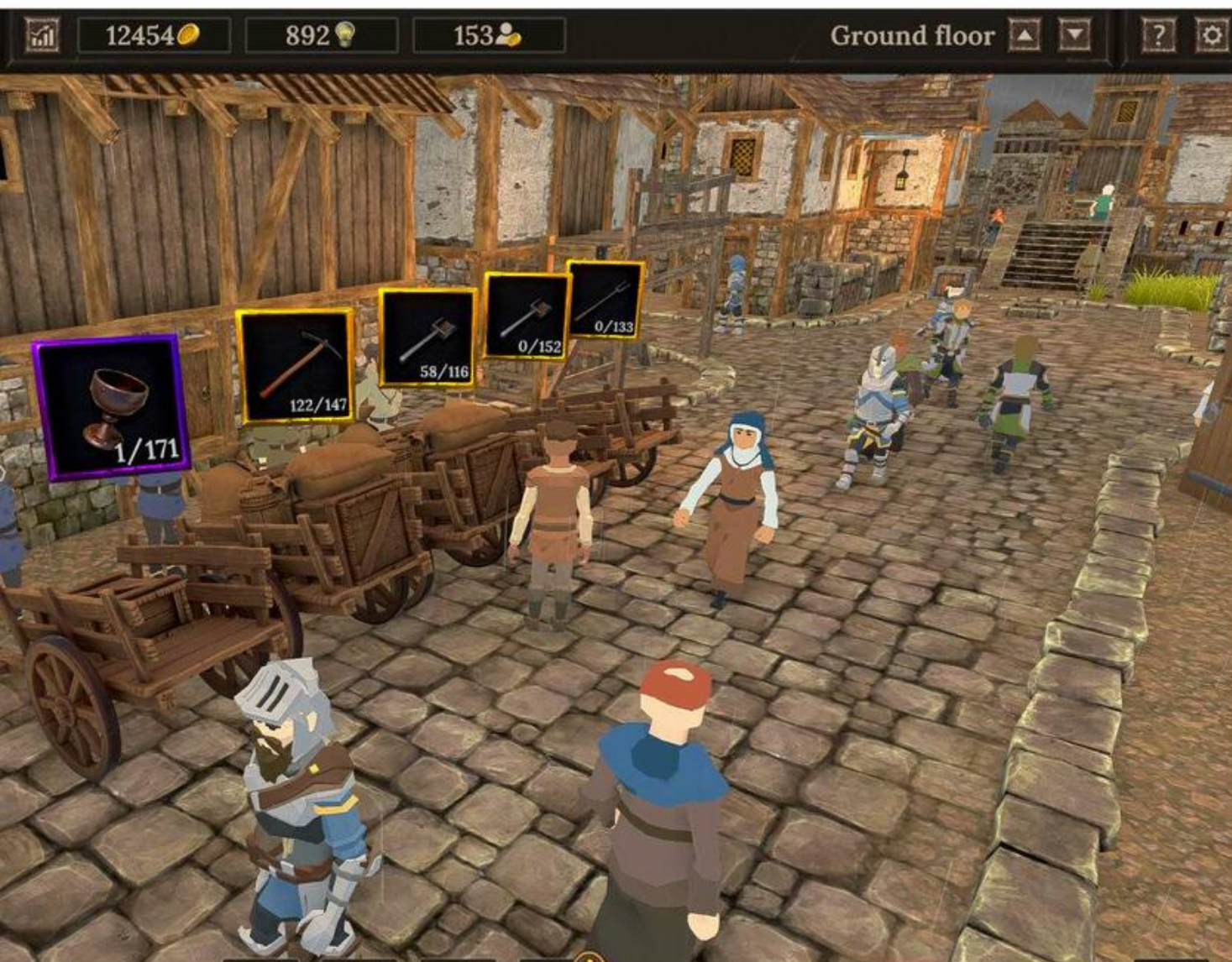
PLAYED IT



QTE-style minigames bring a bit of action to the production process.



MOST OF THE TIME I'M ASSIGNING INDIVIDUAL WORKERS SENSIBLE TASKS



ABOVE: Merchants line up outside the blacksmith, waiting for their orders.

LEFT: A pretty shop is a profitable shop.

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Eriksholm: The Stolen Dream

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Summer 2025

DEVELOPER
River End Games

PUBLISHER
Nordcurrent Labs

LINK
eriksholmgame.com

ERIKSHOLM: THE STOLEN DREAM

Entry-level stealth paired with high-end period drama

Sometimes a game represents more than just another product on the horizon to consume. In the case of *Eriksholm: The Stolen Dream* – an upcoming stealth adventure from small Swedish studio River End Games – it feels like a glimpse at the future of mid-budget games, and a potential intro to stealth for genre newcomers, too.

With the game due for launch before the year's end, River End Games let me have a poke around a polished but short preview build as well as a chance to sit down and have a chat with creative director Anders Hejdenberg, front-man for this newly formed studio of just 17 full-time industry veterans, working on a budget that he described as, "Quite cheap, compared to other mid-range productions," in lieu of divulging actual figures.

STYLE IS SUBSTANCE

Eriksholm is a character-driven drama about a gang of likeable rogues and street urchins stumbling onto a political conspiracy in a familiar-but-fictional Nordic city deep into its industrial revolution. Mechanically, it's a line-of-sight dodging stealth game, like the *Commandos* series boiled down to basics. Perhaps a case of style over substance, but as you can see from the screenshots here, *Eriksholm* is a very stylish game.

While much of the game takes place from a bird's-eye perspective of the titular city, full of narrow alleys, tall buildings and

industrial sprawl, it's when the camera zooms up close that I can't help but be impressed. It feels like prestige TV, full of authentic-looking costumes and with some excellent motion-captured performances. All the more impressive, considering that River End tackled it more like an amateur theatrical production combined with a technical showcase of what a small team can do with Epic's MetaHuman animation rigging technology.

Hejdenberg explained that while the studio's artists were quick to adapt to cutting-edge tech, nobody at the studio had any experience in TV and film. Wanting to not dilute their creative vision, they kept the production almost entirely in-house, casting and motion capture aside. "One of the things that I was nervous about is that I'm not a director. And I have no idea what to tell actors in order to get great results. We were kind of contemplating using an outsider – someone with experience – but I was also kind of nervous. Would they fully understand what we're trying to do? And we came to the conclusion that we know what we want. And if we just hire really good actors, then maybe we can pull it off. "And it actually worked!"

PLAYED IT

COSTUMING DONE CHEAP

Making a game this pretty does require manpower from outside of the core team. Hejdenberg explained that while they did have outside help, they kept budgets slim by relying on local talent.

"We found there's a school here in Gothenburg where they make stage costumes. They were looking for a project for their last year's students. We reached out to them and said, 'Hey, you want to make 20 costumes for our cinematic characters? Victorian era style?' And they were like, 'Oh, my God, Victorian?! We want to do all these'. So then we asked them what it was going to cost. 'Yeah, you pay for the material. Everything else is free.' And they were amazing, so we did provide them with some nice fruit baskets afterwards."

Despite this seemingly chaotic and improvisational production, the end results are genuinely impressive. I never would have guessed that the digitised costumes were the work of students, or the performances delivered without a traditional director. The few cutscenes shown in the preview demo have me



I NEVER WOULD HAVE GUESSED THAT THE COSTUMES WERE THE WORK OF STUDENTS

Eriksholm: The Stolen Dream

The city is filled with period detail and life.

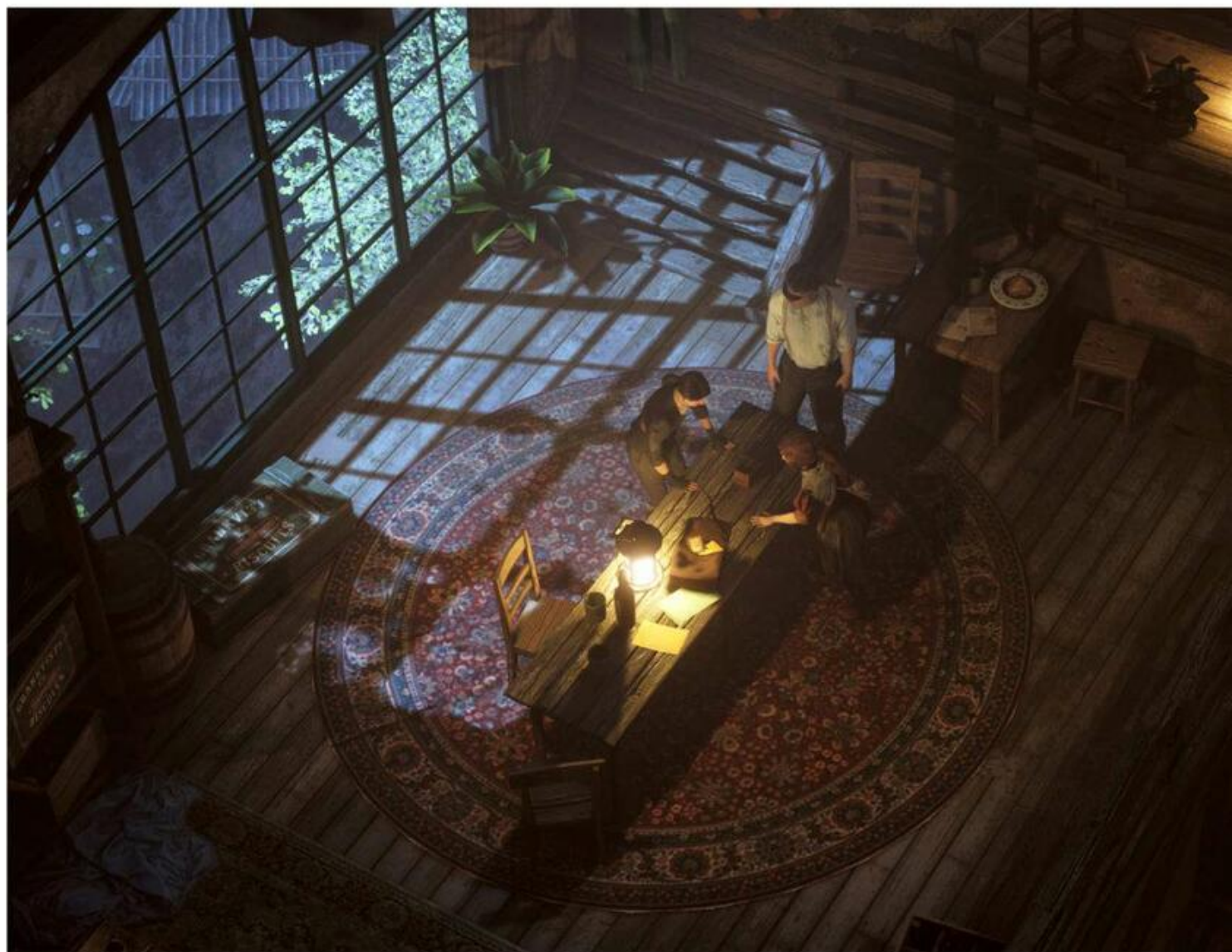


PREVIEW

Eriksholm: The Stolen Dream

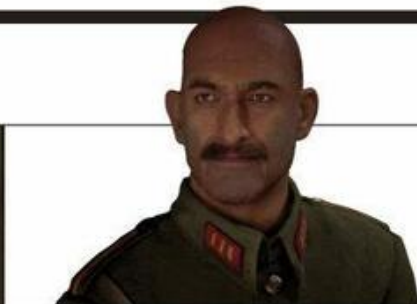
RIGHT: Successfully sneaking around means watching for patterns and exploiting gaps.

BELOW: You control a member of a small squad, who each have different abilities.



Eriksholm: The Stolen Dream

Eriksholm has a cinematic flair.



invested in the story of Hanna, a young street urchin wanted by the police for something that her wayward brother may or may not have done. Whatever her sibling's crime was, it's enough to mobilise a small army of police wanting to question her, and so the game segues almost seamlessly from cutscene to evasion as the camera rises up.

SWEDISH STEALTH 101

As mentioned, this is probably not going to be the most gripping of games if you've played the likes of *Commandos* to death. This is simple, introductory evasion, teaching the fundamentals of watching for patterns and slipping between cover when backs are turned and floors are quiet enough to move at speed across. *Eriksholm* feels like a story-led game glued together with stealthy set-pieces, as you control (at most) a few characters at a time, weaving between guards' sight-lines and traversing streets littered with hiding spots and alleys patrolled by guards.

While there's some optional areas and collectibles off the beaten path, it's mostly linear, and the action is very pass/fail, with any alarm or sighting immediately rolling the action back to the most recent checkpoint, which seemed generously placed. It sounds simple – and honestly, it is – but I enjoyed my time with these first few early segments of *Eriksholm*. Every stealth sequence felt like a bespoke set-piece, distinct and largely intuitive in their flow. Every guard has their own voice and chatter with their cohorts, and Hanna have plenty to say about each street they travel and each obstacle they encounter.

The streets themselves are a treat to explore, though. Dense, but slightly fantastical, inspired by Sweden's architectural history but not quite representing any one real place. I asked Heidenberg if they had any architectural inspirations outside of games, and surprisingly, the answer was Studio Ghibli.

"I knew what kind of general age I wanted to set the game in, but I wasn't quite sure what style to do it. And then I watched Kiki's Delivery Service, which is set in a kind of weird version of 1940s Stockholm and the island outside Gotland. I was really drawn into that world. I thought

that it was because I was Swedish and that I had kind of seen those places in real life. But when I asked people from other countries what they felt, and they said, 'No, I got that same feeling'. There is a special little touch to it that's slightly different to Sweden. It feels like an actual place, even though it's not real."

PROMISE AND PURLOINING

While most of the demo was set in that anime-inspired city itself, the complexity began to ramp up in the final segment of the demo, as I led Hanna and Alva through a smuggler's den outside of the city at night, with a wandering spotlight able to end the mission nearly immediately if it caught either of them out of cover. The focus of the mission quickly became hiding tranquillised guards behind cover, or luring them into the shadows before putting them to sleep. The protagonists thanking and congratulating each other as they pull off each phase of the operation as the pile of unconscious guards grows.

While I expect the game to build on this complexity a little further, I feel that *Eriksholm*'s action will remain pretty straightforward to the end. With small squads, each with only a few abilities (one with stunning blow-darts, one able to distract enemies by throwing stones with a sling, and a third character in the full game able to choke out guards directly), this is more of a cinematic stealth puzzle experience, rather than sneaky, freeform tactics. Heidenberg also confirms that aside from combing past missions for optional lore and collectibles, there'll be no bonus missions or optional modes, owing to the game's focused production.

"I think that this game is going to land around 10 to 12 hours for a first playthrough. We're a small team, so pushing further would only kind of detract from the experience, I think. We looked at that and said, 'You know what, with our limited resources, the best we can hope for is that people have a great time playing it like that one time.'"

And as much as I would love for something to really get my teeth into after *Shadow Gambit*, between the narrative focus and simplified mechanics, my gut feeling is that this could be a tempting gateway game for a fresh audience, while having just enough depth to hold my attention. And if nothing else, it remains a treat to behold, and a testament to what a small studio can do with modern tech and some enthusiastic costuming students.

Dominic Tarason

EVERY STEALTH SEQUENCE FELT LIKE A BESPOKE SET PIECE, DISTINCT IN THEIR FLOW

Outworld Station



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Out now (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Trickjump Games Ltd

PUBLISHER

Trickjump Games Ltd

LINK

tinyurl.com/3d8ajhmt

OUTWORLD STATION

This sim is threatening to devour hours of my time

Friends, I have a disease. Not, uh, not one of the bad ones, I mean a disease of the mind. In any management-esque game, I am incapable of planning until it's too late, until I have layered one haphazard system on another to an extent that I can't easily go back to the drawing board.

I need to slap things together and see how things work to make a plan, but to implement the plan I need to tear apart the ramshackle monster I've built and do it all over again. Is this the worst torment a human being has experienced in history? Yes. And yet, I keep playing these games.

Today's game: *Outworld Station*, a rather pretty assembly-line builder that hit Early Access last month. The premise is simple – you have a cursor, a stack of basic materials, and a dream of turning those basic materials into more complicated materials. You accomplish this with Fordism. Drag enough asteroids into your starting furnace and you can start bolting smelters onto it, which will convert your raw ores into usable ingots. Ingots go into matter printers, whose materials make fabricators, whose materials make artefact analysers, whose findings unlock the cat that killed the rat that lay in the house that Jack built.

You get the idea, and it might sound like a familiar one, but I gotta say in the time I've spent with *Outworld Station* it's taken me back with how slick it all feels, even in Early Access. It's a looker, first of

all: its inky black void is filled with rocks and mysterious structures that all hew to a minimalist, ligne claire-y artstyle that manages to be striking without – I have to imagine – putting too much of a strain on the devs' budget. But more than that, it just has a pleasing rhythm to it.

You're building assembly lines, yes. You're dropping structures, linking them to other structures, and making sure all your parts get where they need to as your whole project escalates in complexity, but while you're doing that you're also exploring the surrounding map, combing over the carcasses of derelict ships and dropping into combat.

DRONE ALONE

Your cursor isn't just your cursor – wherever you drag your mouse, a little orbicular drone rushes to keep up with it. When you collect asteroids to huck into your furnace, it's your drone that's doing that, gathering up rock after rock in an energy field and dashing over to deposit them when you click on your base. It's a cute and clever way of anthropomorphising (kinda, it's still a drone) the true protagonist of the management game: your mouse.

It also means that when you've got your base humming along, churning out materials on the way to fulfilling this or that objective (make 50 of this, 100 of that), you take your drone on a walk to go clear the fog of war, uncovering crashed ships and other bases that you can extract bonus (and often high-tier) materials from with the right gear.

Tap E and you drop into a combat mode; the drone no longer follows your cursor but moves according to WASD, blasting enemy drones with its lasers and making off with the lucre they guard. It's very simple: not the kind of thing that could sustain a full game, but a good respite when you get tired of staring at your ever-expanding factory.

I've only put about an hour into *Outworld Station* so far, so I haven't engaged with the higher-tier processes promised by its Steam description – stuff like building starships – but what I've seen has made me very curious to see where this one goes as it winds through Early Access.

Joshua Wolens



They're my asteroids!

A DREAM OF TURNING THOSE BASIC MATERIALS INTO MORE COMPLICATED MATERIALS



ABOVE: How did this photo of the PC PowerPlay magazine assembly line end up in here?!

LEFT: Upgrading your drone is a smart play, making wiping out enemy drones easier.

Europa Universalis 5

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025DEVELOPER
Paradox TintoPUBLISHER
Paradox InteractiveLINK
tinyurl.com/39racrk3EUROPA
UNIVERSALIS 5

This grand strategy game is going to take hours to unpack

Paradox has finally unveiled the worst-kept secret in strategy gaming: *Europa Universalis 5* is coming. This reveal also means I can talk about my failed attempt to unite the British Isles under Scotland, my conquest of Byzantium as the Ottomans, and how even after many hours of unravelling this behemoth it still makes me feel like a stupid child.

While *Crusader Kings* is the series that really introduced Paradox's complex brand of grand strategy to the wider world, the long-running *Europa Universalis* series has always been the company's flagship. But the 12-year-old *Europa Universalis 4* is already so dense and wide-ranging – especially when you take into account the vast number of DLCs – that it's pretty reasonable to wonder what a sequel could really offer. So cutting to the chase: it's pretty damn different. So much so, in fact, that I have spent a considerable amount of time being pleasantly baffled by its myriad complex systems, rules and ridiculous flexibility. *EU* feels new again, and learning the ropes like a novice has been a delight.

SO WHAT'S NEW?

Let's get the headline changes out of the way, shall we? *EU5* has removed a significant level of abstraction by filling its provinces with diverse pops, like *Victoria 3*, which have different cultures, religions and needs. This makes managing your population considerably more complex. The removal of 'mana' also helps *EU5*

shed more abstraction, as you're no longer collecting points to spend on actions. Instead, the success of your actions, whether they are diplomatic, administrative or military, depends on the skills of named characters placed in positions of power, like your cabinet.

The economic and trade systems are significantly richer now, too. Your provinces can gather goods or produce them in buildings you construct, which can then be used to satisfy your needs or sold on the market. Some buildings need specific goods to function, and these buildings also need workers, as well as cash investment. This isn't a *CK* game, but characters are pushed more to the forefront this time as well. They don't have the rich lives of your *CK* dynasties, but there's still some drama, and they don't feel like simple tools anymore.

The most striking thing about *EU5* is how uncompromising it feels. With *CK3*, there was a real sense that Paradox was inviting everyone to the party. Yes, it's still a party with complex rituals and interactions and not everyone is going to have a great time, but it felt welcoming all the same. *EU5* is more of a private shindig. Something for the hardcore. The history devotees. The number crunchers. The strategy fetishists.

I don't want to paint it as impenetrable. Not completely. *EU5* doesn't eagerly invite everyone in, but it does invite everyone to become the sort of person who'd feel right at home here. The build I played doesn't have a tutorial and does little to give players a way to ease into things. *EU5* is... well, it's a lot. In removing so much of the abstraction and more board-game-esque elements, Paradox has created something that's so much deeper and fascinating than its ancestors, but so much trickier to grasp.

WAR COLLAGE

As I always do when I embark upon a new Paradox misadventure, I began in Scotland. My goal? Spank the English. It's typically a tall order. Even distracted by the Hundred Years War, the English begin with simply more of everything. More cash, resources, manpower (but yes, more enemies too).

Scotland also begins in the midst of a civil war between the Bruce diehards and



THE MOST STRIKING
THING ABOUT EU5 IS HOW
UNCOMPROMISING IT FEELS





✖ the English-loving Balliol loyalists. Naturally I picked the good guys. Sorting out the civil war was simple enough, and anyone who's played a Paradox grand strategy game in the last decade and change will broadly understand how you win a war – win fights and sieges, and grab territory, raising your warscore. OK, it's not actually remotely that simple, but I ain't writing a guide here.

Even with a united Scotland, though, I wasn't even close to ready to take on the southerners. Unfortunately, I had to take a leaf out of the English playbook and start gobbling up Ireland. But hold on, because one does not simply declare war in *EU5*. I mean, you can do that if you really want to, but declaring war without a *casus belli* means that everyone thinks you're kind of a dick, and you do need some international friends if you're gonna get by.

In *CK3* and *EU4*, you can command a minion to fabricate a claim on some territory, and voila: *casus belli*. But this is too gamey for *EU5*. Instead you need to come up with a legitimate reason, and use your spies, which takes time. But even then, it might be impossible to come up with a solid reason why you have to invade another country, and to screw over the English is not, it turns out, a valid reason.

When all else fails, you'll need to get help from your parliament. While *EU4* had parliaments, these institutions are considerably more involved this time around. They represent the estates of your nation, which in turn broadly represent your pops and their competing interests. They have all sorts of agendas, and also powers that you can take advantage of, but only if you can get them to agree. And if you want them to support a new war, you might struggle to pass anything else on the agenda.

This allowed me to begin my conquest of Ireland, starting with Ulster, and halting England's plans. But I had plenty of domestic issues to deal with at the same time. There was friction, you see, between the Highlanders and Lowlanders, the traditionalists and urbanites. I kept having to make decisions about embracing the old ways, the clans and an agrarian society, or supporting the expansion of our cities and the newer burgher class.

THIS ALLOWED ME TO BEGIN MY CONQUEST OF IRELAND, STARTING WITH ULSTER

Naturally, this had an impact on how pleased the estates were with my rule, but it also affected everything from the economy, to my international relationships, to the legal system, to the national language. By favouring the clans and changing the court language to Gaelic, I was popular with the clans and aristos, but this weakened my connection to Europe, specifically my old ally France, and made the city-dwellers pissed off.

To appease irate estates, you can grant them more privileges, which can also come with benefits for you, but there's risk involved: you don't want to empower an estate that might become disloyal. But their fortunes can change, too. A dominant estate's power can be eroded, eventually becoming completely obsolete and ultimately being replaced.

With so many competing concerns, both domestic and international, my dream of outperforming the English started to feel a lot more unrealistic. I realised that, despite decades of experience with Paradox's grand strategy games, I needed to start with something a bit more straightforward.

PUT YOUR FEET UP

My Ottoman campaign had a very different flavour. The Ottomans start in a stronger position than Scotland. A superpower, it's the big boy of Anatolia, has a standing army, and it's on the cusp of being able to spank waning Byzantium. This feels like a great place to begin.

What make an Ottoman campaign so rewarding are the extra narrative components. Certain historical flash points, like the aforementioned Hundred Years War, or the Ottoman rise to prominence, are handled by bespoke 'situations', which come with their own special mechanics. So as the Ottomans, you can hit up a special menu and, for example, claim more Anatolian territory, giving you an instant excuse for warring against a neighbour.

Then there are the semi-random events that crop up, giving you discrete objectives or letting you annex entire nations without a fight. Some of these events give you choices, and in cases where this is an event based on real history, you can see what the canon option is before you make your choice.

So *EU5* gently nudged me in the right direction, putting me in a position to swallow up all the surrounding territory and either keep building up my power or just conquer Byzantium a century early.





ABOVE: The scale of the game and its systems is huge.

LEFT: Playable countries are split into four types: settled, army-based, society, and extraterritorial.





RIGHT: Everyone has a good strategy until they're hit with the Black Death.

BELOW: How long did the Hundred Years War take again?





But in this reactive, dynamic world, making too many big moves can be a big risk. Sure, you might easily be able to sack Constantinople, but being too aggro will inspire coalitions of nations to rise against you, forcing you into a much larger, bloodier conflict.

A TRIP TO THE COUNTRY

Let's just say it's going to be a while until I feel up to running Venice or, even more daunting, the Hanseatic League. Because, yes, you don't just play regular countries in *EU5*. Instead playable entities are broken into four different types: settled country, army-based country, extraterritorial country, and society of pops. A settled country is your default nation. Your Scotlands and Ottoman Empires. An army-based country is one defined by its military – at least to the degree that as long as it has an army, the nation persists. Even if it doesn't own territory. These are your hordes. Extraterritorial countries include the Hanseatic League, and serve specific functions based on buildings they own. They don't own land per se, but they do rule subjects with land. Banks, trading companies, holy orders – these are all extraterritorial countries. A society of pops, meanwhile, is a less settled, tribal group, which doesn't have all the powers of an official state.

Naturally, this opens the door to all sorts of new playstyles and strategies. As a banking country, for instance, you can get fat on international debts, taking over loans and then forcing those nations to pay you the interest instead, filling your coffers so you can embark on big projects. And these specialist countries also get their own bespoke advances, as well, letting you refine and develop them in unique ways.

Advances can net you new reforms, laws, estate privileges and mechanics, and are in part defined by the global historical age. Which ones you have access to can also be determined by which nation you're playing as. So in my Ottoman game, a lot of my early advances were connected to Islam, but I could also research more generic ones relating to things like merchant guilds or naval supremacy. The system feels less

gamified than a typical strategy tech tree, in large part thanks to concepts like the aforementioned age mechanic, and the institutions that these ages spawn.

So the game's second age, the Age of Renaissance, grants new potential advances everyone has access to, while also spawning game-changing institutions like the Renaissance, banking and professional armies. These can spawn dynamically or in their historical locations, and then, like all good ideas, spread through your population, and once enough people have embraced these new concepts, you can start researching the advances these institutions provide.

These fancy new ideas can then spread abroad, through trade routes and across borders, and I am a big fan of how this encourages you to start thinking globally, lest your nation be left behind while everyone's getting to play with new toys. Taking advantage of this spread also requires you to start thinking about the literacy of your population, and your nation's social classes, both of which impact how quickly ideas spread.

GET LOST

I've lost entire afternoons to what at first seemed like simple objectives. "I want to explore this Renaissance thing the Italians are going on about," could lead you down a rabbit hole as you delve into the trading system, select advances and reforms that promote literacy, encourage urbanisation and elevate the burgher class. Systems on top of systems on top of systems. And when you think you've reached the bottom? Nope. More systems.

While this is daunting, it just feels so organic that I didn't feel utterly overwhelmed. Or at least I was too busy to notice it. I found myself just going in for a nibble, dipping my toes in and trying to focus on a single goal, and then a few hours later I'd come up for air and realise I'd gained three new degrees.

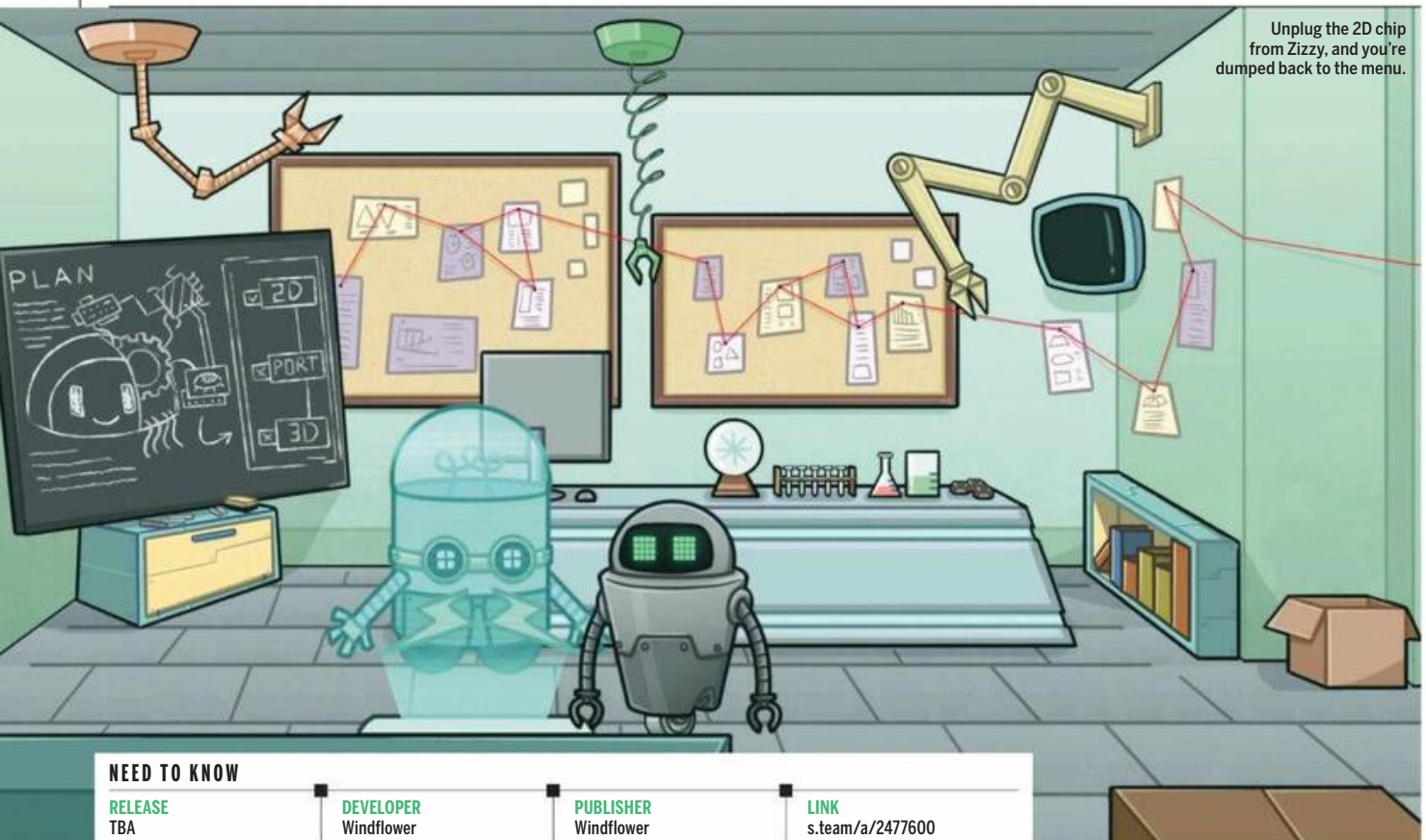
I don't want to get too far ahead of myself, though. As I've already mentioned a few times, *EU5* makes me feel very, very stupid. And some of that is down to the UI being a work-in-progress, or the tooltips not always being clear enough, or systems not entirely working as intended. But mostly it's just because *EU5* is unrelentingly ambitious, breaking away from its ancient board game origins in a way Paradox has never attempted before. Playing it, and being so utterly baffled by it, is a thrill.

Fraser Brown

AS A BANKING COUNTRY, FOR INSTANCE, YOU CAN GET FAT ON INTERNATIONAL DEBTS

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden



OFFSCREEN

The perils of not getting enough screen time, exposed

Have you ever played that *Mario* game on the Switch where the plumber starts in 3D then plays 2D levels set into the walls of the buildings he explores? *Offscreen* inverts that, starting as a 2D game with 3D sections you can access after your robot gets a chip upgrade.

PLAYED IT

First, it needs to be said that the Steam demo of *Offscreen* installed with its language set to Russian. This caused it to be less than easy to play until I worked out how to set it to English with the aid of Google Translate on my phone. Even then, some parts used the Cyrillic alphabet, but this is a demo version of the game and we can forgive that sort of thing.

Especially as the rest of what's on offer is rather excellent, and some things in gaming are universal, regardless of the language being used. Zizzy the robot can move from side to side and jump. Following the GPU update, he's able to



escape from the TV he lives inside and explore in more dimensions, only to find that the 3D universe he's portaled into contains lots of other TVs.

FLATLAND

And by jumping into these TVs, he's able to traverse 2D levels, popping out again to use remote controls to change the channel they're displaying, easing his progress. He can also move the TVs around, shuffling the parts of the level they display to remix it before running and jumping through it.

It's a wonderful concept, and one that really sings in the short demo available, feeling like something Nintendo might have thought up. Its robot protagonist, meanwhile, brings to mind Team Asobi's

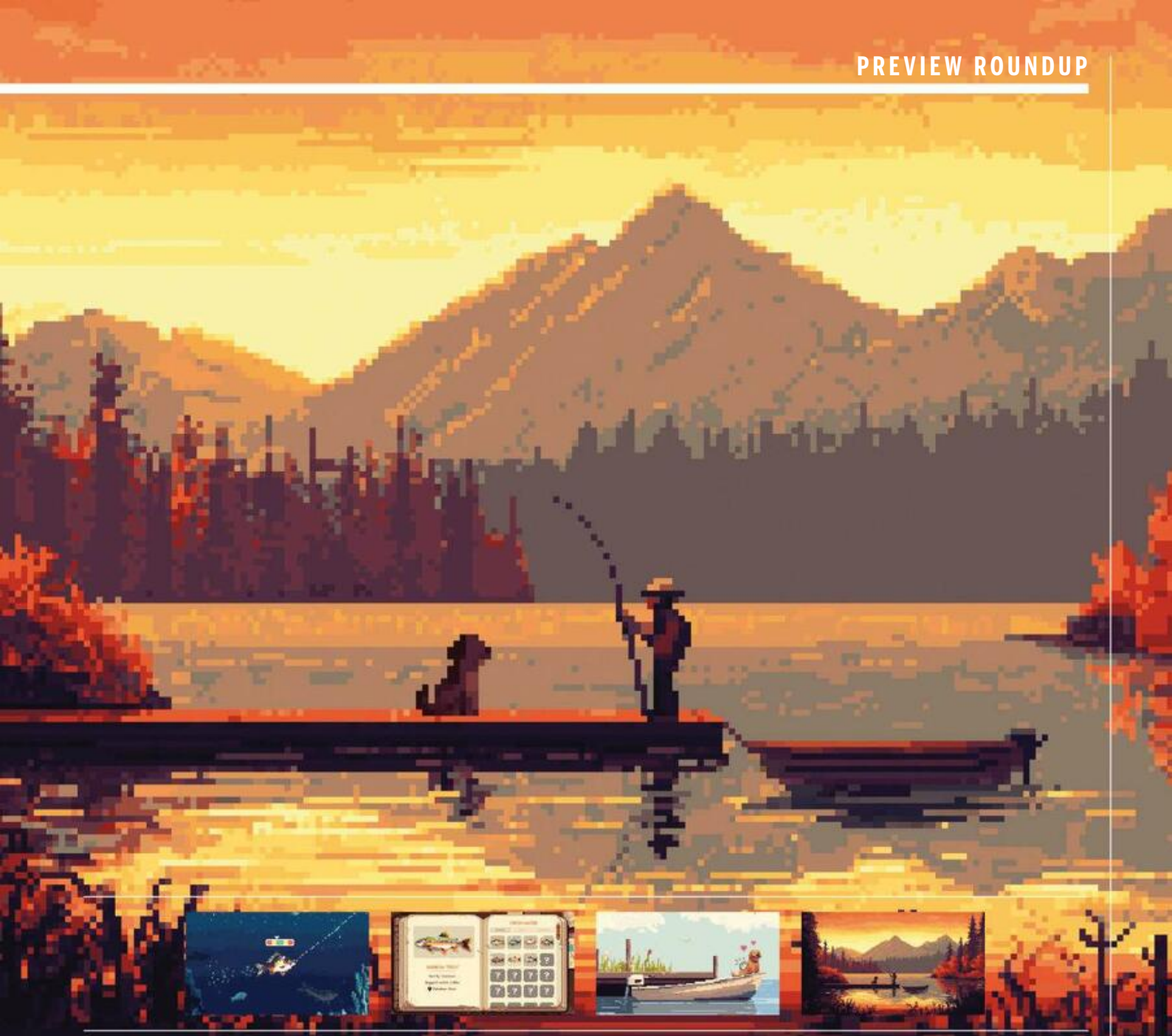
Astro Bot, currently wowing younger PS5 owners and older game reviewers.

KIDNAPPED FRIENDS

And like Astro Bot, Zizzy is on the trail of his kidnapped friends – an evil robot named Magnus has made off with them, leaving the 2D world bereft of its inhabitants (except for the few left behind to tell you all about it). Switching from 2D to 3D and back again also means a switch in location, as the 3D city is filled with neon lights under a dark and oppressive sky, while the 2D levels appear more artfully drawn, full of little sketches and characters. It's clear from the beginning that Zizzy has been planning his escape for some time, for example.

The big question when you stumble upon a demo like this is how the developers will keep the quality up for a whole game, and there's no easy answer to that other than to hope. Windflower doesn't have any other games listed on Steam, so we'll just have to wait and see how this one pans out, with our fingers crossed for a new indie superstar.

IT'S A WONDERFUL CONCEPT, AND ONE THAT REALLY SINGS IN THE SHORT DEMO



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Wombat Brawler

PUBLISHER
Wombat Brawler

LINK
s.team/a/3686530

CAST N CHILL

Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream

Anyone who's played the *Stardew Valley* fishing minigame will know the stress of trying to reel in one of the slippery blighters. Thankfully, *Cast n Chill* isn't about stress – the clue is in the name – but about sinking your hook in the right place and getting enjoyment from the process.

Of course, you can deliberately sink your hook in the wrong place if you want – there's something supremely relaxing about sitting in a boat with your best friend by your side and not actually catching anything.

Catch n Chill is designed as an idle game, a way to waste time when you've got nothing to do and aren't in the mood to exercise your reflexes or puzzle-solving skills. You cast your line, wait, reel, categorise, and return to the dock with your catch. Head to the shop, buy upgrades for your gear, and set off again.

HOOKED ON FISHING

It helps that you're fishing against some beautiful backdrops, the pixel art style meaning it's the colours that do the

talking rather than the detail. There are gorgeous autumnal vistas and snow-capped peaks on show, with the game's slow pace and lack of rush to get anywhere making the backdrops feel more prevalent. You're invited to drink them in and appreciate the work that's gone into them, with all their deer, ducks, herons and waterfalls, rather than flash past in a hurry to get somewhere.

THOU SHALT HAVE A...

There's a completionist drive here, as you have a list of fish to catch and tick off, as well as a map to explore (you're rowing the boat, so it's not exactly fast travel) and favoured fishing spots to discover, but it's not the focus of the game. Instead, you're invited to spend your time enjoying the scenery, trying to get longer casts, and while actually catching fish is perhaps less important, there is enough of a gameplay loop here to keep interest levels up. Oh, and you can pet the dog.

PLAYED
IT

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Ian Evenden

Your base, complete with useless spaceship.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Prospector

PUBLISHER
Prospector

LINK
s.team/a/3719880

OFF-WORLD PROSPECTING

Dig to discover in the sands of an alien world

Ah, mining. It's a strange thing, perhaps, that digging things out of the soil by sheer hard work has become so popular among those of us who would rather be facing a monitor than monitoring a cliff face, but here we are once again, tunnelling into the earth.

PLAYED
IT

Except it's not Earth, but L 98-59 b, a future colony world that has more going on than it might at first appear. It's the work of a solo dev known as Prospector, and you certainly do spend a lot of time in the game looking down a hole with a shovel in your hands.

Your new pre-fabricated outpost has been placed on top of a relic of an earlier, failed, terraforming attempt – which is the sort of news to fill any space colonist with enthusiasm – and you're encouraged to dig down through the layers to discover artefacts from that bygone time. There's a landing pad with a ship you can't use, a utilitarian



bunk, a health station and a computer for messages.

The first thing you see when starting a new game is a biohazard symbol, which possibly isn't the best place to dig. But there are handy piles of sand and rock nearby, which give up the goodies they have buried inside. You have more tools than just the shovel, with a pickaxe for harder surfaces and a scanner to tell you where buried items are, saving time as it makes your tunnels more targeted.

MINE AND CRAFT?

Dig stuff up, and you can jetpack your way over to the waiting train to sell it for credits, which you spend on more booster fuel to get you around faster. The fact that you're digging stuff up

surely points to a crafting system in the future, as there has to be more to the world than stone and steel, although it's currently missing along with any physics simulation – undermine something and it's left floating in the air.

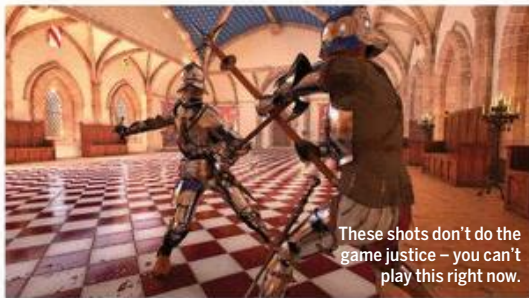
Apart from its basic demo nature, *Off-World Prospecting* is a good looking Unity game, with its chunky, dirty space-colony aesthetic set off by a painted texture style.

UPGRADE YOUR GEAR

As you dig, gather and sell you'll be able to upgrade your gear and use it to dig more effectively, terraforming the planet as you work. The ancient tunnels under the surface are the source of mysterious radio signals, and by discovering what's making them you can get rich by selling them off to the planetary corporation that sent you to the god-forsaken desert world.

It's very early days for *Off-World Prospecting*, but with its echoes of mining games and even *Red Faction*, it's a title with plenty of potential and an impressive demo on Steam.

**YOU CAN JETPACK
YOUR WAY OVER TO
THE WAITING TRAIN TO
SELL IT FOR CREDITS**



These shots don't do the game justice – you can't play this right now.

HALF SWORD

Rip and tear and fall over in an amusing fashion

Start up the *Half Sword* demo on Steam – which, it's important to note, calls itself a tech demo rather than a gameplay demo – and you'll be able to stab your own avatar in the face on what appears to be a character creation screen. From there he's dumped into the Abyss, a foggy (or dark) void in which

crates of clothing and weapons sit marked by candles waiting to be pillaged, and given very little in the way of guidance. Alternatively, you can take part in fights against one or more opponents, in which your avatar's ability to move his arms independently leads to all kinds of awkward flailing about until blood is spilt.

Half Sword has ambitions, this much is clear. It's a physics-based brawler with historically accurate 15th century weapons and armour.

Or at least it will be. Right now it's a blood-laden demo in which a man in pointy shoes waves an axe about. It's important to see a game at this early stage, however, because it gives us a point to refer back to when it's finished.

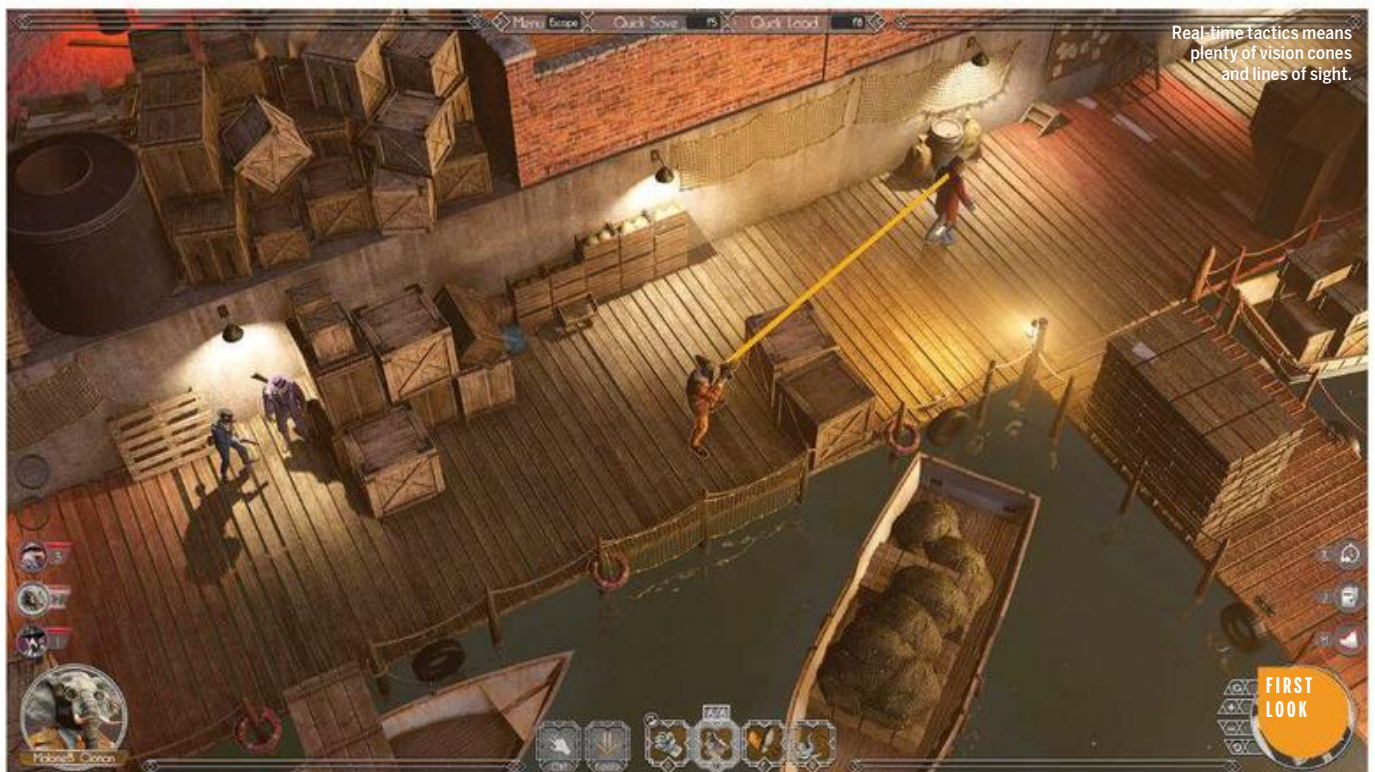
PLAYED IT

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Half Sword Games

PUBLISHER
Game Seer Publishing

LINK
s.team/a/2397300



Real-time tactics means plenty of vision cones and lines of sight.

PROHIBEAST

A faithful hound has beef with Al Capone

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
SUPER AC

PUBLISHER
SUPER AC

LINK
s.team/a/3503790

Chicago, the 1930s. Meat is on the menu, but it's also illegal, so smuggling gangs are bringing shipments of chops, steak and sausages

into the city any way they can to feed the ruthless black market.

Enter Eliot Ness, who's a dog but also a cop, and his specialist team of

Untouchables who will chew up crime and corruption using stealth and tactics. And make a nice casserole for dinner, presumably.

COVER FEATURE

Painkiller





L A N A E T H T I C

PAINKILLER returns, and
this time it's brought friends

By Rick Lane

Painkiller



y favourite part of the new *Painkiller* was also the last thing I tested – the submachine-gun. In a series famous for its enemy-impaling Stakegun and eponymous fan-bladed melee weapon, I dismissed the SMG outright, certain it would be the reboot's least interesting firearm.

Boy, was I wrong. This unassuming death-spitter, the bane of self-respecting *Call of Duty* players worldwide, might be nu-*Painkiller*'s secret MVP. Partly, this is because the SMG excels at clearing the larger, co-op attuned hordes of the sequel.

Mainly though, it's due to the fact the SMG comes with a wicked alt-fire option that shoots an enemy-bursting electronic beam. Moreover, this can be upgraded so that explosions radiate outward to nearby foes, splat-splat-splattling them in a cascading wave of gibbs.

It was this moment, watching a tsunami of blood ripple through the enemy masses, that sold me on nu-*Painkiller*'s potential. A feeling of surprise that epitomises Anshar studios' game more broadly. It's a more radical reimagining of People Can Fly's 2004 shooter than I'd expected. Much of this is exciting,

BELOW: Weapon mods often revolve around the three elemental powers, namely fire, ice and electricity.



while there are a few elements I'm still to be convinced by. But whichever way you slice it (and there are many ways to slice things in Anshar's shooter) *Painkiller* gets the most important thing right – it has an absolutely cracking arsenal.

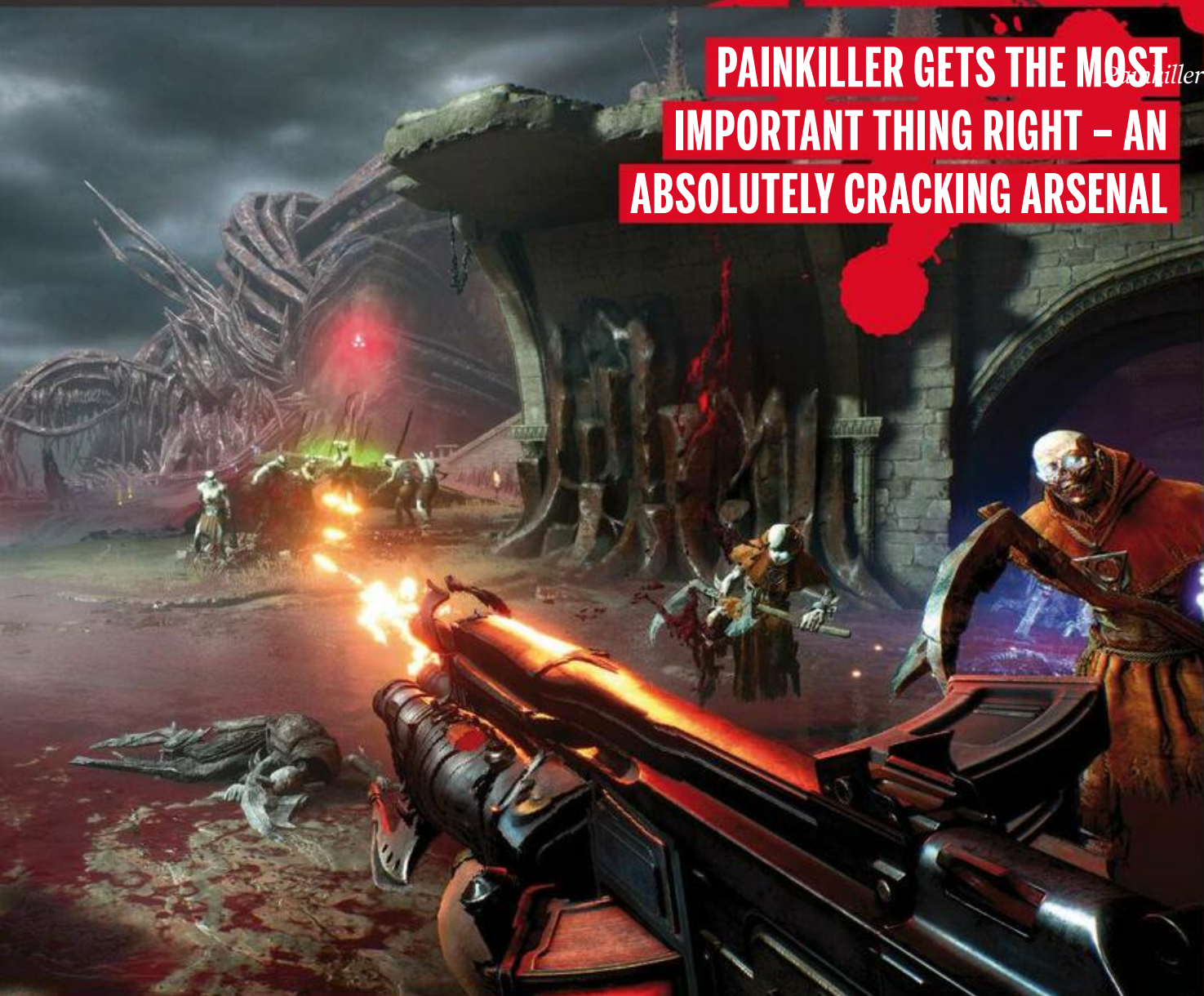
ASPRIN TO GREATNESS

We'll rifle through *Painkiller*'s gun cabinet in due course. For now, it's worth going over what *Painkiller* is. Anshar's reimagining (and the studio is particular in calling it that, as opposed to a remake or reboot) bears many of the original's traits, a classically styled, fast-paced shooter in which you blast hordes of enemies in the grimly gothic realm of Purgatory with an array of creatively engineered weapons. But there's one big difference – Anshar's *Painkiller* is a cooperative game.

"From the get-go, we knew we wanted to make a co-op title," says Damian Wyspia ski, *Painkiller*'s creative director. "The focus after that was to figure out: how do we tackle that? How can we make [a] fun



PAINKILLER GETS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING RIGHT – AN ABSOLUTELY CRACKING ARSENAL



co-op title that will fit the *Painkiller* franchise and will share the same legacy?" As for why Anshar wanted to make a cooperative *Painkiller*, it relates to the series' somewhat chequered history. The original *Painkiller* was the first game developed in Poland to garner worldwide attention. "*Painkiller* was

The Witcher before *The Witcher*," says Michał Sapiński, *Painkiller*'s lead level designer. "It was one of the first Polish games to make it big on the international scene. So definitely, it was a proud thing for gamers in Poland to be like, 'Oh yeah. We know it, this is ours.'" But *Painkiller*'s journey since the original has been

ABOVE: As with all classically minded shooters, levels are littered with secrets. Finding some of these will require ingenuity, feats of acrobatics, or both.

wayward. Publisher Dreamcatcher Interactive released numerous standalone expansions with diminishing returns, which were followed by a mediocre reboot in 2012 titled *Painkiller – Hell & Damnation*. As a series (if you can call it that) *Painkiller* has struggled to build upon the foundations of the original. "This is one of the reasons why we didn't want to make a remake," Wyspiański explains. "Those guys tried to basically remake the game. [It] didn't work out, you know, and we want to bring something fresh to the formula."

Painkiller is designed around three-person co-op. It was originally meant to support four players, but this was reduced to three because four players was too hectic.

"[We] wanted to be a movement shooter, [a] fast-paced one, and to get to four-player co-op, we would have to slow the whole game down," says Kamil Wojciekiewicz, *Painkiller*'s art director. "We didn't want to do that, because it's one of the pillars of the game."

GUN SHOW

Exploring *Painkiller*'s rejigged arsenal



ELECTRODRIVER

Essentially a machinegun that fires ninja-stars and lets you rain lightning down on your enemies. What's not to like?



STAKEGUN

A surprisingly challenging weapon to handle in *Painkiller*'s intense co-op mayhem, but the drill-bit mod is gloriously silly.



ROCKET LAUNCHER

Its classic stopping power can be customised in numerous ways, while the ice-chaingun alt is very tasty.



HAND-CANNON

Painkiller's new gun can be fitted with a scope for precision killing, or an electrically charged attack.

Painkiller

YOU HURTLE THROUGH WINDING, LINEAR LEVELS BATTLING ROILING HORDES OF ENEMIES



In its basic structure, *Painkiller* feels like a mixture of *Left4Dead* and *Doom Eternal*. Joined by two friends, you hurtle through winding, linear levels battling roiling hordes of enemies. Yet this plays out not at a smooth, grounded Source-engine glide, but with the frenetic acrobatics of id Software's 2020 shooter. You can dash in any direction to avoid enemy attacks, ground-slide at the speed of a car, rebound off walls, use bounce pads and a hookshot manoeuvre to traverse combat arenas through the air. You can even propel yourself through groups of enemies. Dashing through a cluster of foes will cause your character to ruthlessly shoulder them aside, often splattering some of them in the process.

It's an incredibly nimble game, and the levels are designed to accommodate this speedy progression. "It's a little bit of a racetrack," says Sapi ski. "This is cooperative, but everyone wants to be first, everyone wants to be fastest,

ABOVE: Special enemies can be stunned through sustained alt-fire, opening them up to a charged Painkiller finisher.

RAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

A pneumatic drill and ripped up concrete



1 ENVIRONMENT

This battle takes place beneath a vast cathedral you enter at the end of the level. Inside the cathedral's Nave, the bell drops from above, collapsing the floor and dropping you into a pit where the fight begins.

2 RAT

This boss can wander around the arena and chase players through it. According to Anshar, the other bosses in the game will be separated from the play area, mainly because they are considerably larger.

3 BELL

When it climbs on the bell, the boss unleashes waves of blood attacks that must be dodged. As with *Painkiller*'s special enemies, blasting the boss with alt-fire will reveal weakspots, letting you deal additional damage.



locomotive after a boiler explosion, that's what it looks like. During play, each player can choose two weapons for any given run (plus the Painkiller itself, which is always available for reasons that will soon become clear.) For my first stab at the game, I selected two familiar firearms, the Stakegun, which fires lengths of sharpened wood that impale enemies on walls, and the shotgun.

That initial run mainly involved me figuring out the rhythms of Anshar's reimagining. Combining the onrushing hordes of a cooperative multiplayer shooter with the balletic movement of a retro-minded FPS results in an intensive onboarding, one that takes a bit of adjustment. Indeed, the Stakegun, which I'd picked because of its iconic association with *Painkiller*, was surprisingly tricky to handle against the rapidly encroaching clusters of enemies coming my way.

Complicating the learning experience is that, whereas *Painkiller*'s enemies all operated on a level (ish) the new game features a *Left4Dead*-style division between regular 'horde' enemies and around half a dozen more powerful

demonic foes. These special enemies include the Taurus, a hulking, bull-like demon that rushes you close range with a club – essentially a mini *Dark Souls* boss who rocks up to test your dodging skills – and the Tormentor, who moves around underground before popping up to coat the floor in a sticky goo which inhibits your movement. You'll encounter these enemies in dynamic exploration sections where the flow of monsters is controlled by an AI director, and more authored arena fights.

The latter often involve specific objectives, such as having to fill battery-like canisters with the blood of your enemies to open doors. This usually means shunting the canister around the arena to meet with onrushing groups of enemies, killing them only when they enter its radius.

All of this, the movement, the enemy types, the objectives... it's a lot to take in, and early on I wondered whether *Painkiller*'s new groove wasn't quite for me.

But the rhythms of *Painkiller*'s combat come together once you learn how to play with its most important weapon: the Painkiller.

everyone wants to get all the secrets, everyone wants to [use] all the great movement tech."

GROWING PAINS

My playtest saw me run through two levels in the game, both set in one of *Painkiller*'s three biomes. This biome, known as Faith and Steel, is the most characteristically *Painkiller* of the trio, a darkly gothic plain that's all vaulted arches, crocket-covered spires, and flying buttresses. Other locations you'll explore include an Arabian Nights-inspired desert called Souls and Sands, and a third zone called Flesh and Water, where the verdant plant life subsists off vast fields of decaying corpses.

Much like *Left4Dead*'s chapters, you can choose to play these biomes in any order. Yet wherever you go, every biome in *Painkiller* is afflicted by a force known as corruption. This manifests in different ways. In Faith and Steel, it appears as the latter, warped tendrils of metal that writhe and curl through the architecture. If you've ever seen a picture of a

BELOW: Wait, hang on, which one of us decapitated that fella behind you?



Painkiller



INVASIVE PROCEDURES

If you're unfamiliar with the original, this might seem self-evident. But *People Can Fly's* deadly windmill is actually one of the game's weaker weapons, quickly superseded by the various ranged weapons you unlock. But in Anshar's reimagining, the Painkiller is the crux of the entire shooter.

To start with, the standard fan-blade attack not only shreds through enemies, but also replenishes ammo for your other guns, so there's an imperative to switch to it frequently. More importantly, though, the Painkiller is empowered with a devastating charge attack. This can smash up large groups of horde enemies, but if you stun a special enemy by blasting it with a weapon's alt-fire for a sustained duration, you can then use the Painkiller's charge attack to finish it off.

As well as being useful, it's also a satisfying full stop to any combat encounter, something which Wyspia ski wanted to have in the game. "This is something that came up during the experimentation phase," he says. "[It] was a nice touch

to have this kind of finisher. It's flashy, it's fun to use. You can use it as a traversal mechanic, even."

The Painkiller is the key ingredient that the combat revolves around. But all the flavour is added by the other weapons you wield across the course of the game. And believe me, there is a lot of flavour here. Every weapon seen in the original *Painkiller* returns, plus the SMG introduced in the *Battle out of Hell* expansion. There's also one entirely new weapon, a hand-cannon.

"We decided we need at least one weapon that maybe feels a little bit more modern," Wyspia ski says. "There are players that are looking for this kind of experience, and that's why we came up with the hand cannon weapon, to have this niche filled." Sapi ski summarises Anshar's reasoning more succinctly. "Try releasing a shooter [in 2025] without the high-damage hitscan weapon."

That brings the total number of weapons in the game to seven. On its own, this might not sound like a vast arsenal. But *Painkiller's* weapons are extensively modular. Like the original and most modern shooters, every weapon has primary and

secondary fire modes. But Anshar's *Painkiller* gives you a choice between two completely different alt-fires for each weapon, while the primary fire on most weapons can also be extensively customised.

For example, the Stakegun has a primary fire that can either shoot three stakes at once in a wide line or shoot a spinning drill bit that deals additional damage to enemies over time. Its alt-fires, meanwhile, are a splashy grenade launcher, and an energy trap ominously known as Bezaliel's Snare. The shotgun, meanwhile, retains the enemy-freezing alt fire of the original, but it also has a repulsor mode that propels crowds of enemies away from you as if they've run full-tilt into a vertical-facing trampoline (which, I should stress, is tremendous fun.)

Each fire-mode also has an upgrade path that alters its function, affecting parameters like damage, cascade effects and so forth. The result, according to weapon designer Tomasz Depczy ski, is a total of 72 different weapon upgrades. "One of

BELOW: And who could forget dear rat boy?



EACH OF THE FOUR PLAYER CHARACTERS HAS A UNIQUE PASSIVE ABILITY



the great things I myself discover[ed] in the game, [is] that when we implemented other mods and upgrades and we test them against other weapons or the weapons that other players were using, we were discovering new synergies," he says.

The weapon upgrades aren't the only modifiers in *Painkiller*, either.

Each of the four player characters – Sol, Roc, Ink and Void – has a unique passive ability that gives them a small, but distinct mechanical advantage, or as Wyspia ski puts it "A little perk you can build upon." For example, Roc, a Victorian gunslinger, has a higher HP than the other characters, while Void, a cosmic

ABOVE: The Stakegun has the juice in terms of feedback, but I found other weapons more useful in fighting *Painkiller*'s hordes.

weirdo with a galaxy for a face, gets a boost to weapon damage by default.

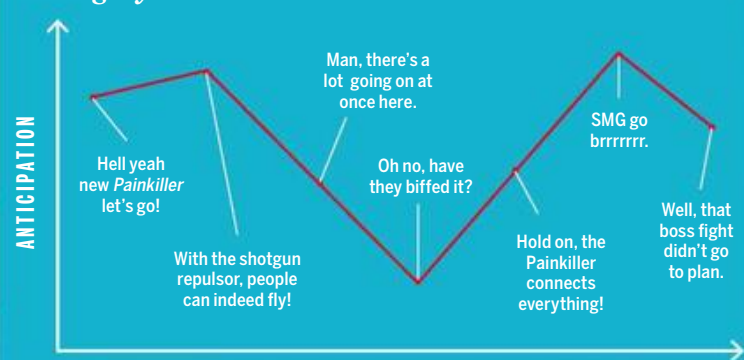
TAROTS BEAT 'EM ALL

In addition, like the original *Painkiller*, players can select two tarot cards to carry with them into battle. Tarot cards are single-use ability boosters that enable a wide range of perks, from providing damage boosts or increased health regen under specific circumstances, to making a player immune to being knocked down when reviving a friend.

Currently, *Painkiller* has 44 tarot cards. Anshar had initially planned to include even more, some with hyper-specific functions. But the studio opted to limit the tarot system to perks that any player could benefit from. "We were looking also into more cards that are connected with characters or weapons, but we decided against that, because this would be like prohibiting," Wyspia ski says. "It's probably better to make them more universal so the players can really mix and match those."

PAIN CHART

Plotting my real-time reaction to the new *Painkiller*



GARGANTUAN BOSSES ARE ANOTHER HALLMARK OF THE SERIES



ABOVE: See that big cow lad at the back? He's trouble.

There's one final feature in *Painkiller* that plays into how you define your fighting style – a scoring system. If the drill-bit attachment to the Stakegun didn't give it away, Anshar's *Painkiller* is partly inspired by *Bulletstorm*, the shooter People Can Fly made after *Painkiller*. This includes a skillshot-like system that rewards you with points for how you kill demons, getting headshots, impaling them and so forth.

While this system isn't as fundamental to the combat as in *Bulletstorm*, you can use it to your advantage. Some tarot cards are activated by gaining a certain number of points during combat, meaning you can essentially use your own killing prowess to supercharge your character. Either way, watching your shots rack up a laundry list of cruel and unusual punishments is wickedly entertaining, and a welcome addition to *Painkiller*'s combat.

VERMIN-CIDE

By the time we neared the end of our second run through the demo, I was

fully on board with *Painkiller*'s action. I was bouncing around levels with aplomb. I'd settled upon a particularly tasty weapon combination (submachine-gun plus a rocket launcher with an enemy-freezing chaingun alt-fire, yes please), and I was enjoying rummaging around levels for secrets. Some of these require teamwork to reveal, a good

example of how *Painkiller* infuses classic FPS design with co-op play.

All of which led up to an encounter with Faith and Steel's boss. Gargantuan bosses are another hallmark of the series, and Anshar wanted to replicate this while also making them more interesting to fight. "The bosses were quite simple in the original. They were huge.

CONTROL ALT = DELETE

Painkiller's alt-fires can change how weapons handle

SHOTGUN



FREEZER

Fires a burst of ice particles that freezes groups of enemies solid.



REPULSOR

Unleashes an energy blast that sends smaller foes flying.



MORAX'S JUDGEMENT

Fires an ice shell that bursts on impact, freezing enemies.

SMG



VOLTAIC

Fires an electricity beam. Can be upgraded with a shockwave effect.



split between the easier horde enemies and the more capable special enemies makes perfect sense for a game like this mechanically, the former lack some of the personality and weirdness of the original. People Can Fly's menagerie of monsters was ridiculously diverse, including evil hooded monks, ninjas, samurai, vampires, banshees, decaying soldiers and much more.

There are nods to this roster within Anshar's game, such as hooded monks and shieldbearing templars. And some of these enemies do different things, like trying to snipe you or running up to you and exploding. But visually, they are mostly variations on a similar zombie-ish theme. According to Anshar, the reasons for this creative change are partly stylistic. "In our lore, the regular enemies are tormented souls. They are post-human, so they are based on human physiology," Wojciekiewicz says. But it's also down to pragmatism. The original *Painkiller* introduces players to a new biome almost every level, often with unique enemies to go with him. "Just the breadth of it would be simply impossible," Sapi ski says.

Moreover, on launch, *Painkiller* will feature nine levels split over three biomes, each of which culminates in a boss. Given we ran through two of those levels in about an hour, I wonder if this will prove sufficiently long enough to get players aboard. Fatshark's 40k shooter *Darktide* had a similar scope when it launched in 2022, and while it's a decent game, its reputation did initially suffer as a consequence.

That said, *Painkiller* may prove larger than the slice I've seen suggests. Furthermore, there is substantial replay value built in here, with four characters to play as, four difficulty levels, and several dozen tarot cards to experiment with.

Most of all though, there are those weapons. I sampled every weapon available in the game, but I felt like I barely scratched the surface of their potential. The shotgun and the rocket launcher were both marvellous to play with, and with the SMG I found gold in the place I least expected. I can't help but wonder what other deliriously powerful combinations I'm yet to discover, and I think this will prove *Painkiller*'s defining quality when it launches this autumn. ■

They made a huge impression. But they were basically [a] super big sponge," Wojciekiewicz says. For the reimagining, Anshar wanted greater distinction between encounters. "Each boss fight plays differently. These are big set-pieces that you have to figure out when you first come to the boss fight."

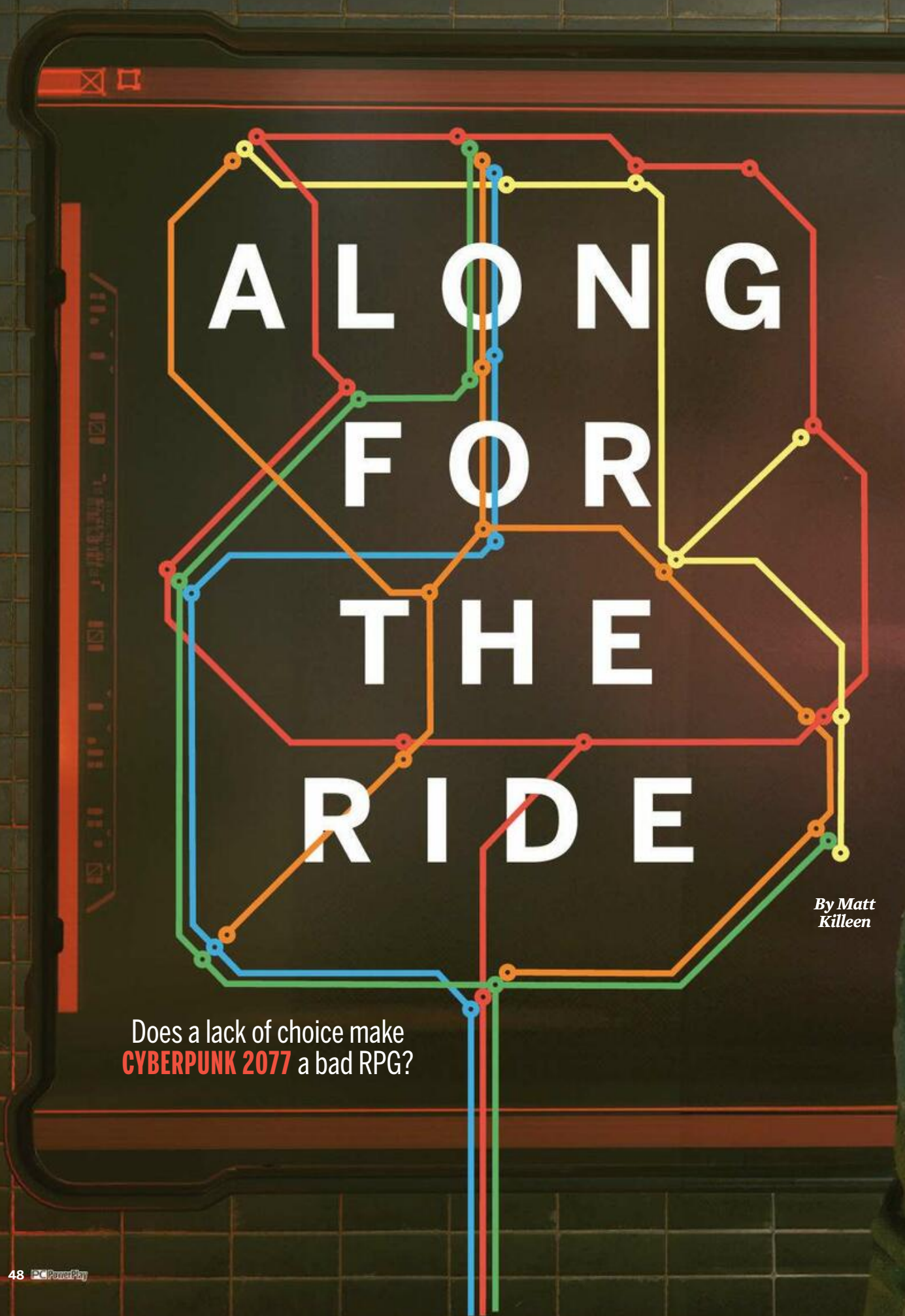
The boss I fought, which Anshar says is the smallest in the game, was an enormous, undead rat. This is, I will stress, more interesting than it sounds. For starters, the rat's name is Orion of the Bloodswarm. Moreover, as well as stalking players around the arena, Orion can also slam a giant bell into the ground, producing bloody shockwaves that players must dodge. It makes for an impressive spectacle, though how challenging it will prove for players who have already bloodied their fists on FromSoftware's games isn't clear.

DOCTOR'S ORDERS

For all I enjoyed the core loop of *Painkiller*, there are a couple of concerns I should address. While the

BELOW: The hand cannon is the only new weapon added to *Painkiller*, but it more than makes up for this with the weapon mods.





ALONG FOR THE RIDE

By Matt
Killeen

Does a lack of choice make
CYBERPUNK 2077 a bad RPG?



The rendezvous is a motel room. The heist has gone badly and, as the sole survivor, I'm limping in with the goods. The fixer is frightened. Long before Dexter DeShawn is having me gunned down coming out of the bathroom, I knew that I was getting double-crossed.

I wanted to get my shot in first. I had another buyer for the chip in my head. That would have been thematically and contextually appropriate, but I was explicitly unable to do any of that.

I've had a degree of dissonance playing *Cyberpunk 2077*. I'm visiting Night City years after everyone else, yes, but this is 2.2 – the definitive version. However, my efforts to play it my way, as opposed to how the developers want me to, makes a mockery of its Steam tags: Cyberpunk, Open World, RPG. To put it in terms the denizens of Night City would understand, I'm doll-chipped. But I'm conscious.

I play most things as Lawful/Neutral Good. Proportionate, righteous violence, but no casual murder. Here, I'm obligated to be a

killer and thief, and that's that. Even a gun with a non-lethal mod can only be earned by killing, and killing the poor and the disenfranchised.

ORIGINAL CYBER-PUNK

I was playing as me – a better looking, younger, me anyway – which seemed appropriate when presented with character creation tools. And to be clear, I'm an original cyberpunk. I grew up in the '80s, soaked in black rain and smoky neon. I was the guitarist in a band called Chrome Orchid. Now I'm actually there, shouldn't I like it more?

I put my gut-feelings under the scrutiny of some experts, like Lorne Nudel, a senior writer at Ubisoft, and a producer of games for Pixar and Universal, who also teaches storytelling through ELVTR UK and Game Story Writer. He vehemently disagrees with my first issue:

"Giving the player the choice to senselessly kill Dexter would destroy an essential element of the entire story. Dexter's betrayal, far from having no bearing, is the inciting incident of the story, akin to Joel getting saddled with Ellie. The rug pull can become a tired trope when deployed lazily. If serving a meaningful purpose however, it can be essential."

I'm not entirely convinced. The story requires I end up at the tip, yes, but that doesn't necessitate the proscribed betrayal. But if we end up in the same place, should the journey be proscribed in this way?

PUT THE RP IN RPG

Writer/illustrator Kim Hutson, former lead producer on *Starmourn*,



KIM HUTSON
Former lead producer, *Starmourn*



DR IVAN GIRINA
Senior lecturer in Game Studies, Brunel University



LORNE NUDEL
Senior writer, Ubisoft

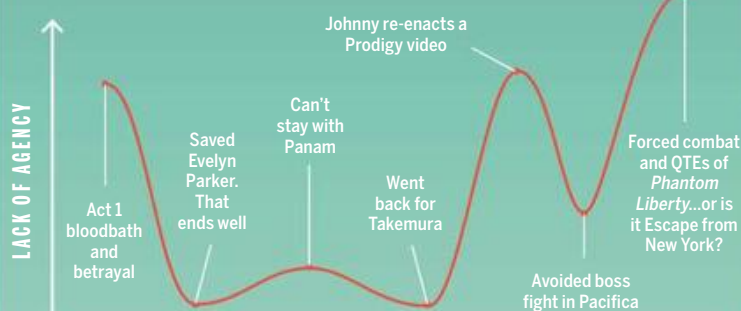
sees this tendency as a function of finance, as well as storytelling, but wants some RP in her RPGs. "I had this exact issue with *Fallout 4*, and *Starfield*, but free-to-play games do this as they run out of content." She sees a place for tropes, even the more obvious ones.

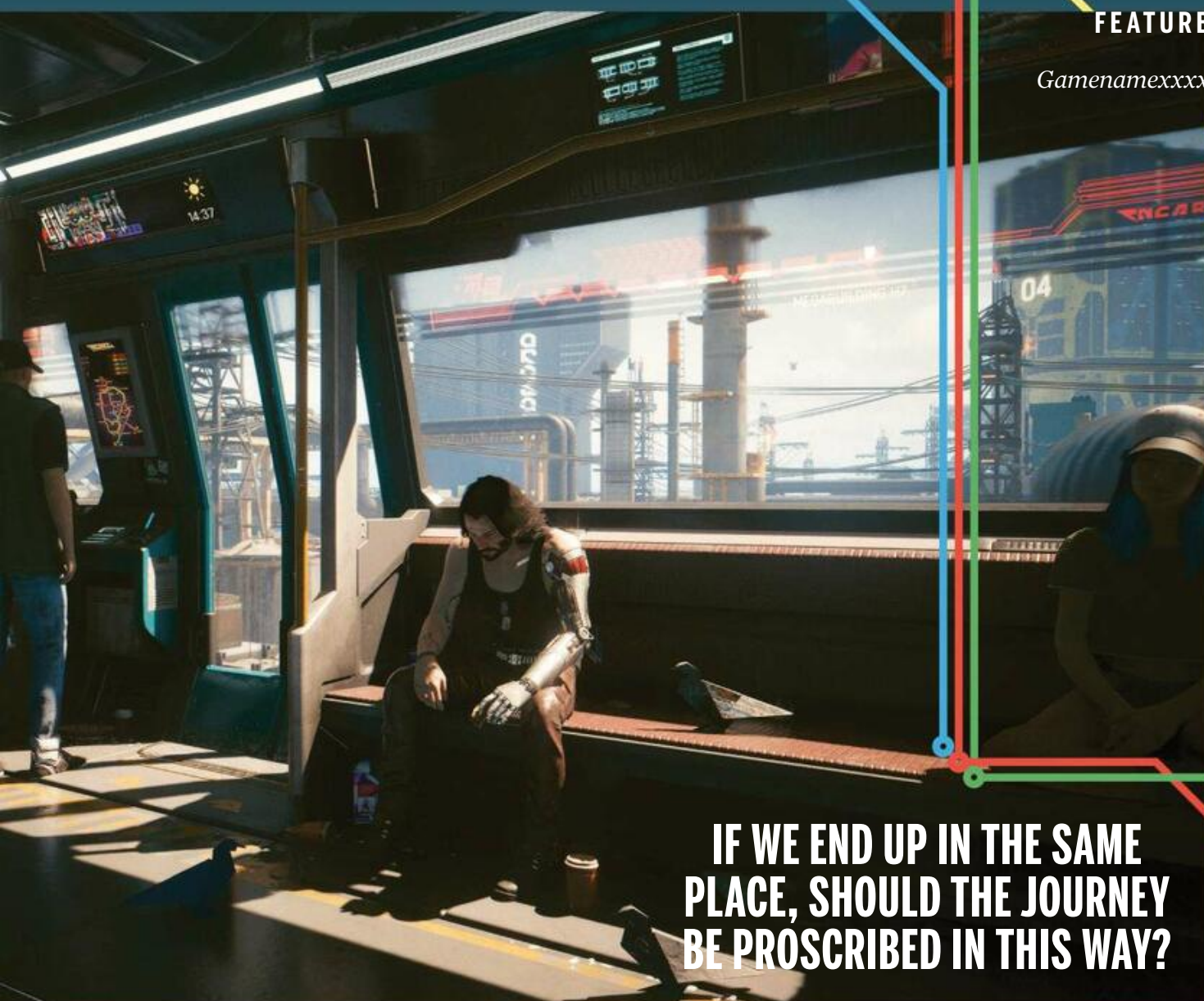
"When writing, a two-dimensional character who it's OK to judge and discard can draw your MC into focus. If I'm illustrating a police chase, you can have silhouettes of cops in the background of a more detailed suspect... but in a game, you really need both, and for the player to have agency so the player needs to feel like their input and decisions are impacting the world."

She recognises, however, that agency can and should have limits. "I remember playing a demo of *BLOOD* way back when, and the fact that I got to decide to smash a window, or push a light switch, was what made it stand out. Yet, I just started playing *South of Midnight* and was initially frustrated by the lack of interactivity in the surroundings. But... if you're

LIMITED AGENT MAN

Am I playing this, or is it playing me?





IF WE END UP IN THE SAME PLACE, SHOULD THE JOURNEY BE PROSCRIBED IN THIS WAY?

frantically trying to save your mother, you wouldn't be picking up every random potted plant. A lot of people lose urgency, worrying that they'll miss something important. So, I quite like that being taken away for the sake of immersion."

AGENCY LIFE

Dr Ivan Girina, a senior lecturer in Game Studies at Brunel University London, inevitably takes a theory approach, "Less characterisation can lead to more identification. When more predefined, as in *Assassin's Creed* or *The Witcher*, the narrative can feel more coherent and immersive. In contrast, *Cyberpunk 2077* offers extensive customisation, and this can result in a mismatch between the perceived character's depth and how much it impacts the game world.

"There's an aesthetic pleasure in making choices and seeing their consequences, but agency is now less associated with a sense of freedom [in critical studies] as a balance between constraints and affordances,



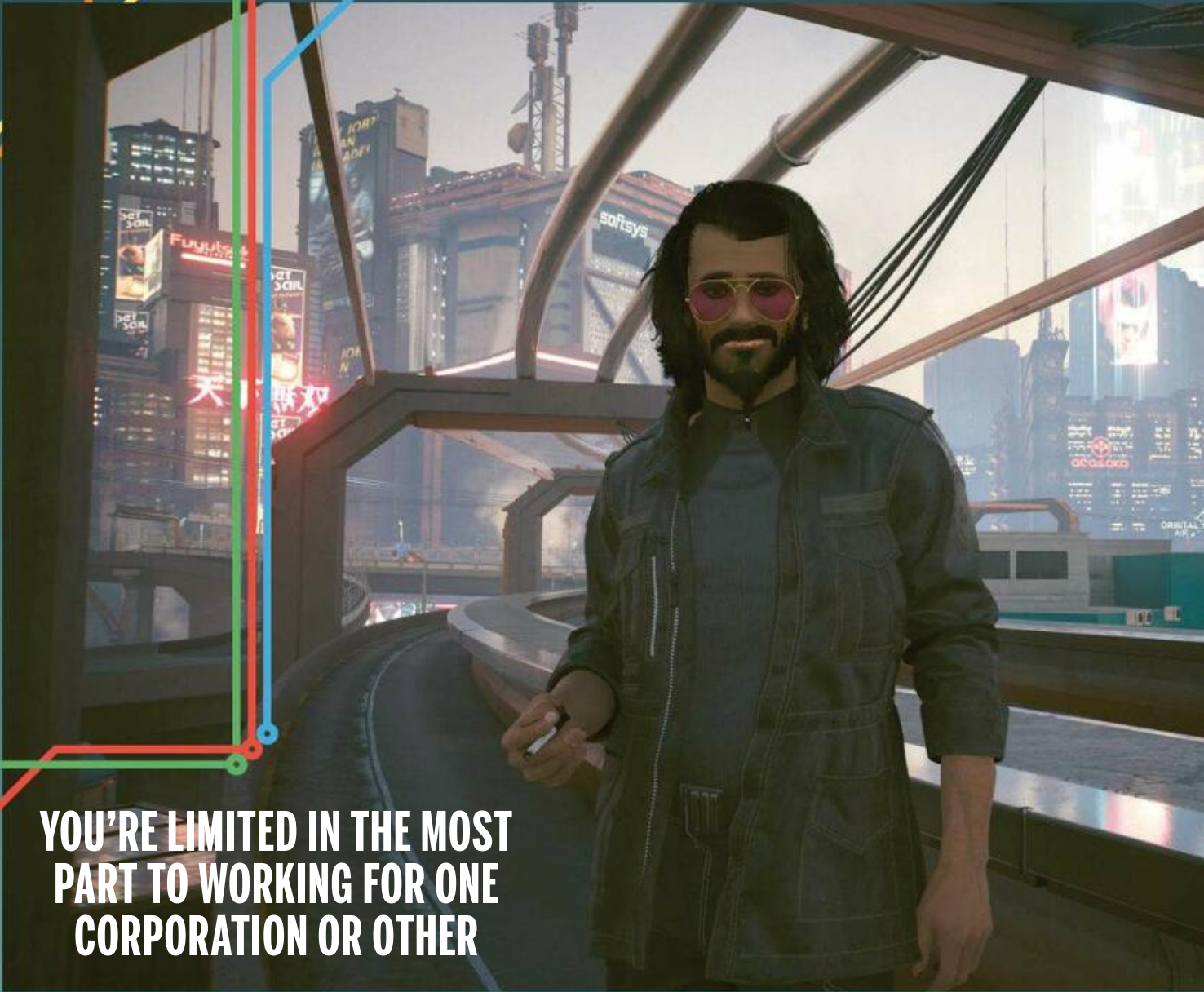
where constraints create urgency or invisibly guide choices. Thus, agency is often critiqued as a synthetic pleasure of mastery."

He means the illusion of choice, and I'm all for that. I don't mind ending up at the tip after all. He goes on, "Agency is also in our relationship with games. The more we experience, the more it highlights the lack of it in reality.

Interestingly, *Cyberpunk 2077* critiques our relationship with technology and potential alienation from it, acting as a meta-critique of videogames themselves."

BAMBOOZLED

I'm a fan of how the *Far Cry* games offer a way out of the inevitable bloodbath. Conversely, *Read Dead Redemption 2*, gave me a string of



YOU'RE LIMITED IN THE MOST PART TO WORKING FOR ONE CORPORATION OR OTHER

✖ failed heists, because Arthur resisted the truth I could see, as he was resisting the changes in his world. But *CP2077* can feel like I'm playing the No Russian level of *Modern Warfare 2* over and over again. I see the systems and understand them. After all, 'would you kindly' was a long time ago. I want to be bamboozled so I can pretend otherwise. However, Nudel believes that I need to buy into the experience more: "Player choice is only an illusion to those rejecting the game's thematic project. Players are bound to a fantasy's limits and operating within them is what games are, by definition. Obfuscating those rails, while not the purpose of a game, is part of the craft of seamless narrative design, which aims to deliver an experience that feels self-directed."

That much we agree on. He continues, "There are meaningful choices, like whether to work with Meredith Stout, not to mention the game's final choice. But that is always bounded by story. A game with full player freedom is no longer a story,



but a playground, and while stories can happen, random events are not stories from a narrative perspective. That *Cyberpunk 2077* is an RPG means that the player is playing a role. A role's limits make it a role."

SAVE THE WORLD

While I appreciate the distinction, what is my role? I can't save the world, or even improve it a little. You're limited in the most part to working for one corporation or other, left to beat up on the powerless and poor, or take Johnny's dark route to mass-murder. Was this a conscious choice on the part of CDPR? Is that the point? Nudel believes so, "Perhaps the message is indeed that when unfettered necro-capitalism takes hold, all we will have left is to kill each other. Frankly, I feel persuaded. Night City is a prison to many, and the struggle to get ahead can seem pointless by design. The failed heists serve the theme of greed and betrayal in a corrupt system. The player can choose how they fight, but they cannot beat the grinding

machine of capitalism – a cyberpunk genre convention."

Bunel's Ivan Girina, likewise, sees this as diegetic powerlessness. "The character is forced to be involved and engage with large institutions. It's a generic cyberpunk premise – these corporations are encompassing engines of desire and control, commodifying synthetic pleasures, digital identities and technological freedom to re-inscribe undesirable human elements, at a cost. The choice of protest is seen as futile."

WHO CARES?

CP2077 is one of the best-selling games of all time. If I feel unrepresented or corralled by it, am I simply playing the wrong game? Girina thinks not, "The question of 'representation' is complex and politically loaded, often opposed to that of artistic freedom. The game is coherent in its investment within the cyberpunk genre, denouncing – while also replicating – the violence of a man-made world of technological power and control, in which the only



HEART OF...NEVER MIND

You don't have to go on that rampage



FAR CRY 4

Far Cry 4 sees you at the Big Bad's dinner table as horrible things go down, and it's implied you should escape and begin your adventure. However, you can wait and resolve your story.



FAR CRY 5

Far Cry 5, rather than arresting Joseph Seed as he clearly wants you to, you can let discretion be the better part of valour and leave Hope County before everything falls apart.



FAR CRY 6

In *Far Cry 6*, you can decide you just aren't going to get involved in the revolution, and end up on the beach listening to the news of what you opted out of. I appreciated the game more for that lack of agency.



RDR2

Yes, the Van der Linde gang was being set up, but I knew there was a mole, and who it was. I wanted to shoot him the minute I met him in Strawberry. I couldn't without perma-failing.

revolution possible is one obtained through violent means. On the other hand, a different – more pacifist – option could have provided more venues for innovation and experimentation. In this sense, the game reflects larger trends in the industry, for which AAA games increasingly lack experimentation and consequent crystallisation within generic formulas, at the intersection between market research and financial costs, so they find an already beaten path to their audience.”

Lorne Nudel argues that that I'd be better served elsewhere, “Games and stories have no responsibility to represent everyone or indeed anyone. Stories may be a place for people to see themselves in others – fantasies, even mirrors, not for who you are, but who you might be. If a game does not offer the player a way to evade the dilemmas, then it's because those dilemmas are inseparable from the story. So, if players feel they cannot do whatever they want and that is what they came for, they are playing the wrong game.”

I think part of the reason that *CP2077* hasn't totally grabbed me – although I'm 80 hours in – is it makes me sad. The years accumulated since first renting *Blade Runner*, while wearing shades indoors, have made me look at the game in a different way than that callow youth would have. *Night City's* diversions are the most juvenile and prurient possible. I see a possible end of our society reflected in its world.

Grina is sympathetic, “In a way, the game mirrors contemporary issues and questions around the possibility of protest in an age of total

data, in which voices, faces, political ideas expressed in public are automatically recorded, easily scanned and made into data, and made available for governments and companies alike.”

My last question to Nudel is how *CP2077* seemed to him, given the last five years of real-world politics. He says: “Prescient?”

EDGERUNNERS

Watching the Netflix series, I sympathised with David's tragedy. His upbringing and experience explained his decisions. Not choices I would have made, but it wasn't my story. I asked Rafał Jaki, the showrunner, now working on *Witchfire*, whether creating good linear narratives is easier than creating good interactive ones, or whether it comes with its own complications attached.

“For sure it's easier if you look at it from the perspective of the complexity of the task – if you have a game with a branching narrative, not only you should track what the character is doing, but also where and when. Playing *Skyrim*, I did the whole ‘become the Archmage’ storyline, but right after that the guard of the magic school asked me who I was. In that moment the suspension of disbelief was shattered. Nothing I did mattered anymore, as the game did not ‘see me’ and my actions. Whereas on *Edgerunners*, my main concern was plot, characters, or lore, and I could manufacture an ideal situation. Not that linear writing is easy – it just has fewer moving parts to execute on the vision and artistic intent.” ■



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Utterly broken or offensively bad; no value.

Example *Big Brother*, *Mad Dog McCree*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Skull Island: Rise of Kong*, *ShellShock: Nam '67*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Underworld Ascendant*, *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort.

Examples *Sonic: Lost World*, *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III*, *Redfall*, *Lego Horizon Adventures*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed especially well.

Examples *Minecraft Legends*, *Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *New World*, *Skull and Bones*, *Forspoken*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Deep Rock Galactic*, *Star Wars Outlaws*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments. We love it.

Examples *Age of Wonders 4*, *Helldivers II*

90%-94% Important to PC gaming and ahead of its time.

Examples *Elden Ring*, *Factorio*, *Balatro*

95%-98% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Baldur's Gate 3*, *Minecraft*, *Metaphor: ReFantazio*

99%-100% Advances the human species. Provides a transcendent feeling not dissimilar to the ending of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.



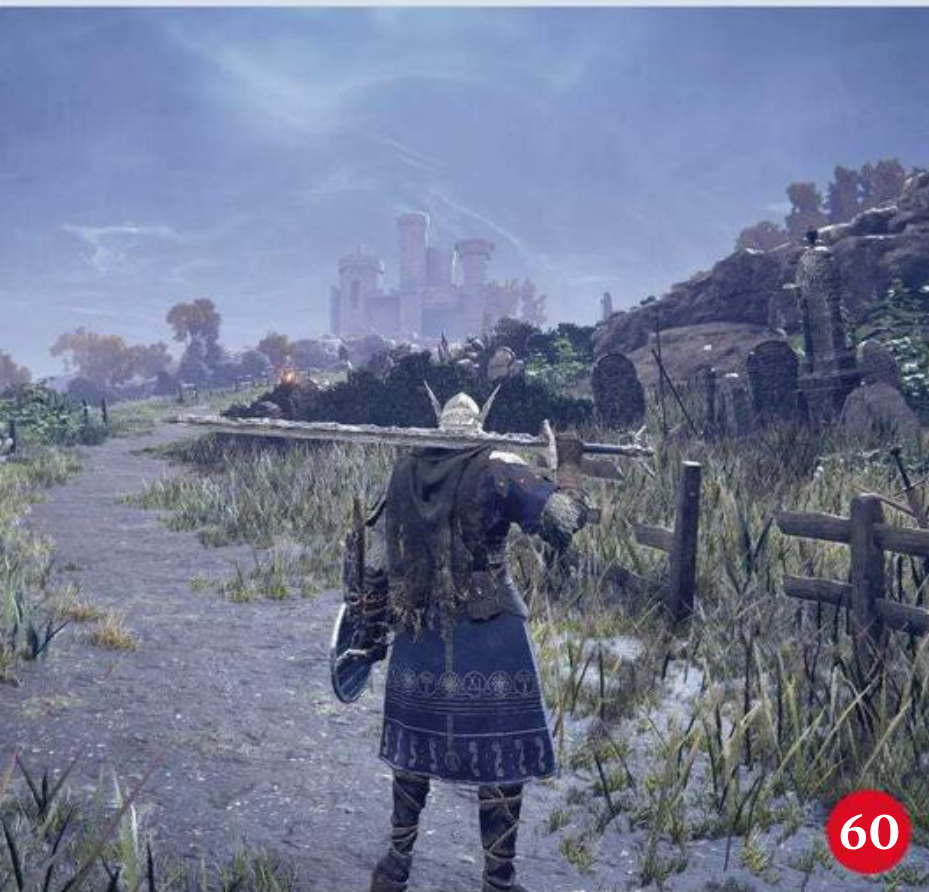
The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.



Bullet heaven

If you grew up playing videogames throughout the 1990s, it is likely you've still got a soft spot for old-fashioned horizontal or vertical shmups. Legendary shoot 'em ups such as *Radiant Silvergun*, *Dodonpachi*, *Battle Garegga* and more, which pleasingly can now easily be played on PC, were formative gaming experiences, steeping me in the adrenaline-inducing neon rush of bullet hell.

Which is why we've clicked immediately with *Doom: The Dark Ages*, which has been recalibrated by id Software to, actually, play very much like a shmup, and especially when fighting its daemoniac bosses. Like a shoot 'em up you must stand and fight in *The Dark Ages*, while weaving through and repelling waves of enemy projectiles and attacks. Simply put, it rocks, and we highly recommend it.



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FREE GAMES

- 80 Fused 240
- 81 The Flayed Man
- 81 Pack



This month's uncivilised reviewers...



MORGAN PARK
Specialist in
Dumping fools
Currently playing
Skin Deep
This month
Lured console gamers
to sit on a trash chute
with pictures of Marcus
Fenix. Bon voyage!



PHIL IWANIUK
Specialist in
Caressing rubber
Currently playing
Japanese Drift Master
This month
Was found butt-naked
in bed with a pair of
Zestino drifting tyres.
Oh Phil, not again.



KERRY BRUNSKILL
Specialist in
Unethical science
Currently playing
The Alters
This month
Cloned herself to write
two reviews at once.
Kerry 2 wanted to be
paid in cheeky Nando's.



TYLER COLP
Specialist in
Speed looting
Currently playing
Elden Ring: Nightreign
This month
Secretly opened all our
bags of Tangfastics
and took all the cola
bottles. What a bast...



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Kojima's nonsense
Currently playing
Death Stranding
This month
Tucked into Kojima's
old-fashioned Hollywood
buffet. *Death Stranding*
makes sense now!



UNCIVILISED

DOOM: THE DARK AGES is indulgent and deliciously violent, but surprisingly safe

By Morgan Park

In a time when the FPS campaign is so vanishingly rare that the only helping of big-budget shooting we can rely on each year is from *Call of Duty*, it'd be easy for id Software to kick up its feet and decide "more *Doom*" is good enough. It'd be good enough for me. But that'd be dereliction of id's duty to the genre it created.

To id, a new *Doom* is an opportunity to demolish a perfectly good sand castle and start fresh. *Doom: The Dark Ages* is the trilogy's sharpest zag yet – recasting the Slayer from a meaty fighter jet, dashing past the hordes of Hell, to a stalwart tank, smashing shield-first into the action.

The transition is successful, but not without major sacrifice. This is *Doom* at its most indulgent and deliciously violent, but it's also dumbed down and undeniably the easiest of the trilogy. Maps are uncharacteristically barren, secrets abnormally obvious, and puzzles so simple that they hardly fit the description. Viewed through the lens of loud feedback that insisted *Doom Eternal* was too complicated, *The Dark Ages* is an overcorrection.

SHORT LEASH

The Dark Ages turns back the clock to our favourite demon smasher's salad days as a pawn of the Makyr's (those floating tentacle guys from the previous games) in a war against Hell. He's the same Slayer as ever, still feral and focused in his distaste for demons, now sporting a tasteful beast pelt to let us know we're in olden times. But in a decision that proves profoundly shortsighted, the Makyr's keep him locked up in a spaceship with a shock collar. You can imagine how that goes.

We got Sentinels, battle tanks, mechs, dragons and a surprising density of cutscenes for *Doom*. This time, it's not just detached robot voices telling the Slayer what to kill next. Instead, we see the main players in his orbit, King Novik of

Argent D'Nur vs Prince Ahzrak of Hell, facing off between bouts of bloodshed. Characters and plot have as much nuance as wrestling, setting the stage for the campaign's next set-piece without getting bogged down by proper nouns.

It's appropriately uncomplicated. The Slayer's otherworldly determination and general freakishness are amplified by his proximity to normal, communicative humans. They treat him like an

unknowable demigod, inherently dangerous but effective when pointed in the direction of hellspawn. I loved the dynamic, partly because id is paying off years of mythbuilding, but

This Slayer adopts the role of a deranged Master Chief

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The latest FPS from the makers of *Doom*, *Quake* and *Wolfenstein*

EXPECT TO PAY
\$119

DEVELOPER
id Software

PUBLISHER
Bethesda

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 9900KS,
32GB RAM,
Nvidia GeForce
RTX 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
tinyurl.com/nhhpbp68

also because this Slayer adopts the role of a deranged Master Chief, more or less following orders as long as he agrees with the mission.

CLOSE GUARD

The Dark Ages' rebooted gun ballet revolves around the Shield Saw. Bound to right-click, the shield blocks all damage from the front and sends green projectiles back to their senders. It's a change that ripples through every facet of *The Dark Ages*, anchoring the Slayer to the ground in exchange for survivability.

I cannot sing the praises of the Shield Saw loud enough: shrugging off the blows of lesser demons and nailing the timing on parries is empowering from minute one, elevating *Doom's* brutality and giving the player permission to run toward the biggest threats instead of playing keep-away. In fact, the only move resembling *Eternal's* air dash is a shield dash that instantly closes the distance on large demons and obliterates fodder on contact. An early upgrade gives the shield its chainsaw teeth, turning it into a throwable that either stuns or slices straight through demons.

The shield slots into *Doom's* deadly dance like it was always there. It's elegant, useful, aggressive... and unfortunately also one-note. Once you can throw it around, the shield is done evolving, my tactics were locked in for the campaign's duration.

CIVILISED AGE

What *The Dark Ages* gains with its shield, it loses with its guns. Using right-click to block means guns no longer have secondary fire modes – they're still upgradable, but now focused on passive boosts to reload speed, fire rate, or damage. Besides a few bright spots, like a Shredder upgrade that let me shoot at my thrown shield to ricochet stakes toward enemies, my weapons never improved in ways that encouraged me to alter my game plan.

SLAYER CHIC

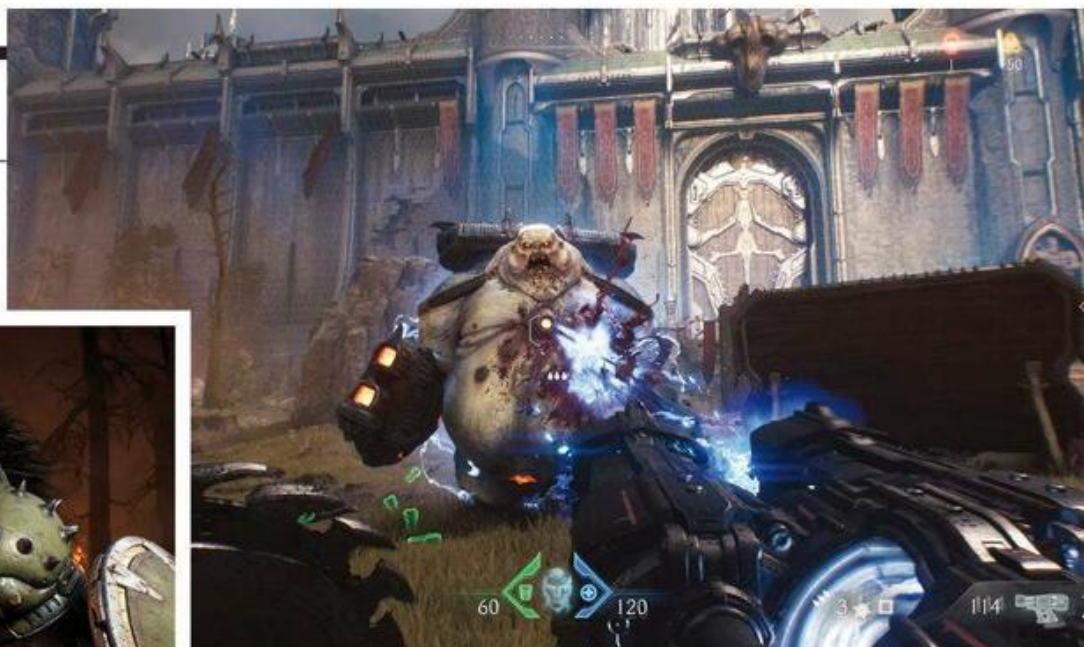
A positively medieval new look

1 FUR CAPE
Doom Slayer radiates animalistic power with this fierce medieval edit. The bold neck ruff is so on-trend right now.

2 SPIKED PLATE
Just when you thought punk was out, Doom Slayer boldly calls it back for a summer takeover. Gonna go viral.

3 DISTRESSED SHIELD
Set to be this season's key accessory update, Doom Slayer's distressed shield levels up this look riotously.





ABOVE: Throwing your chainshield into these fat bastards is a smart tactic.

FAR LEFT: Despite many vast hellscape, The Dark Ages does offer some traditional corridors, too.

BELOW: The scale of the war you find yourself in is frequently epic.





The setting is Argent D'Nur during its war against Hell.



FAR RIGHT: Don't worry, the Slayer still has his trusty double barrel shotgun.

BELOW: "So then I says to Mabel I says..."



For example: I'd been glancing at this greyed-out screen of upgrades called Shield Runes for hours, anticipating some sort of blue Gravity Gun-level twist that'd take my shield antics to the next level. When I got my first Shield Rune halfway through the game, I was disappointed to find that they're essentially gun upgrades for the shield – damage-dealing attacks automatically triggered by successful parries, and I could only have one equipped. Neat, but since they're just something that happens when I parry an attack, it's just more DPS on the pile.

What worked in hour one of *The Dark Ages* – spamming my shotguns, shield dashing away and deflecting anything coloured green – worked in hour 17, and that's a huge bummer.

As much as it pains me to admit, *The Dark Ages'* thematic stand-ins for ballistic guns just aren't as fun to shoot. The Ballista replacement launches stakes that hit hard but have an oddly short range, the Shredder is just a Heavy Cannon that sounds like a nail gun, and those guns that hurl bits of skull are all bark and no bite. The lone exception to this rule is the Chainshot – a monstrous back-half arrival that launches wrecking balls, caving in skulls before reeling back into the gun like a sinful yo-yo. Thankfully id didn't mess with its two shotguns, the rocket launcher or the plasma rifle, all of which sound and look better than ever.

BLUNT TRAUMA

Bland guns are a symptom of *The Dark Ages'* larger streamlining problems. The role of any individual gun is murky at best because all demons are vulnerable to almost all weapons, and most don't pose a significant threat. Every boss fight and high-tier enemy is designed around creating openings by parrying with the shield.

This is a quietly huge shift because in both previous *Dooms* of this series, enemies had clear-cut resistances and weaknesses that, here, are replaced by throwing the shield at armour to destroy it. The Slayer's constant vulnerability previously meant his arsenal was his shield. It was about working quickly and efficiently to kill demons faster

than they can kill you. It was crucial to survey the battlefield and make decisions about which weapons to conserve for tougher targets. The only way out was through. In *The Dark Ages*, the solution to every problem is in your left hand: block it, shoot it, and you're done.

All you gotta do for endless piles of ammo is punch the nearest grunt

It doesn't help that ammo is completely irrelevant, too. In a truly baffling change, the chainsaw is gone, and now all you gotta do for endless piles of ammo is punch (E) the nearest grunt. Glory kills get a similar

treatment: they're mostly gone, with larger demons getting some gruesome new animations while the majority of executions settle for brief slo-mo punches that pop health items. Hear that? It's the sound of *Doom's* signature health/ammo/shield resource economy evaporating.

FLATTENED

I get the sense that *The Dark Ages'* heavy mechanical pruning is in service of making it the most accessible, instantly enjoyable *Doom* for the most people. If that's the case, then mission accomplished. It's still *Doom*, so it's still very fun. The last two set the bar absurdly high, and being in their shadows still makes *The Dark Ages* one of the best singleplayer FPSes around.

I suspect its throttled pace will make *The Dark Ages* the most comfortable of the series to play with a controller. Customisable difficulty will help, too: a long list of toggles and sliders let me tune everything

from projectile speeds and parry windows to exact damage values. That's a win for everybody.

I did have more fun after increasing enemy aggression, tightening the parry window, and experimenting with higher projectile speeds, but at some point, I had to accept I was fishing for complexity that wasn't there.

The Dark Ages' levels are simplistic next to the mazes of the last two games. Presumably to accommodate the Slayer's wimpy new jump, most maps are massive, flat, and devoid of hazards – like id took 2016's winding corridors and pressed them into a pancake. I like that they're more friendly to backtracking than ever, with areas spoking off a central platform, but a few of the larger maps had me sprinting across empty deserts way too often.

Secrets are still scattered literally everywhere, but the majority of them are so obviously placed and announced by the map that I rarely felt like I was discovering something. It's another area where *Eternal* had more to offer: those ultra-hard, opt-in challenge rooms? Gone. Now puzzles just give you an extra life or more gold to buy upgrades. At least those platforming sections that a lot of folks hated (but I loved) demanded a quick reflex test to get to the side goodies.

I should mention the mech and dragon stuff that's all over the trailers. They're cool little moments of punching demons in a big robot and dogfighting with hellships sprinkled throughout the 22-level campaign, but they're so brief, easy and detached from the main action that they didn't stick in my head.

If it sounds like I'm just asking for *Doom Eternal 2*, I promise I'm not. *The Dark Ages* is fun in totally different ways than its predecessors, and I love that, but its peaks are lower. After rolling credits, I went back to *Doom* (2016) and *Eternal* to confirm the gut feeling. id has done a lot of subtraction with not a lot of addition. *Doom* is a series I associate with taking big swings, but *The Dark Ages* is safe. ■

A HISTORY OF ULTRA-VIOLENCE

Bethesda's *Doom* trilogy is now complete



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The ripping and tearing *Doom: The Dark Ages* is indulgent and deliciously violent, but plays it surprisingly safe.

80

NIGHT SHIFT

ELDEN RING: NIGHTREIGN is a flawed, but strangely compelling experiment

By Tyler Colp

In the fight against *Elden Ring: Nightreign*'s riff on Mothra, I never expected it would eventually touch down and mount the head of its partner, a giant stick bug with claws, like a mech. For the rest of the fight they were operating in unison, a kaiju cowboy with orbital lasers piercing the sky. That's a problem pesticide can't solve, but, it turns out, three guys with bows absolutely can.

There's nothing like fighting a boss in a FromSoftware game that is designed to be a joke with you as the punchline – and defying fate with your own ridiculous strategy. *Elden Ring: Nightreign* is a game about losing a fistfight over and over until you luck your way into the opportunity to bring three guns.

Even if you've played *Elden Ring*, *Nightreign* will surprise you. Imagine the Lands Between as a stadium filled with familiar monsters and a team of three players as its contestants. It's an action RPG as a sport, cranked up to two times speed, and designed to be replayed every 30 minutes. Randomised loot and an ever-tightening battle royale-style circle apply constant pressure that you're only released from at the end of the match, whether you survive or not. *Nightreign* is the most peculiar

game FromSoft has made since the '90s. It's also its most abrasive.

Even now after putting well over 30 hours into it, I believe *Nightreign* is both a trend-defying remix of *Elden Ring* and also a pile of complete bullshit that I shouldn't have to deal with in the year 2025.

I can't help but respect the fact that it works, however. Dropping down into Limtown with the boys is the kind of thing someone would pitch

The most peculiar game FromSoft has made since the '90s

on NexusMods, and yet that is exactly what I've been doing in *Nightreign*. We've been 'looting churches', 'clearing camps' and 'popping crab' for the past week. Some of my most heated, frustrating moments – like when a boss 'invaded' my run to steal entire levels from me before peacing out – were cooled by the fact that I was palling around *Elden Ring* like it was *Fortnite*.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A co-op action-RPG/
battle royale
hybrid set in the
Elden Ring universe

EXPECT TO PAY
\$56

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-12900K,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 5090

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
[en.bandainamcoent.
eu/elden-ring/
elden-ring-nightreign](https://en.bandainamcoent.eu/elden-ring/elden-ring-nightreign)

ACTUALLY TERRIBLE?

There were also plenty of times I was convinced that maybe *Nightreign* is actually a terrible idea. *Elden Ring* didn't need a time limit, nor did it need a randomised loot system. The randomisation often feels designed – or under-designed – just to screw you over. There's a difference between mistiming a dodge on a fatal attack and spending ten minutes on a gruelling boss fight because the map refused to cough up a holy weapon for a boss who is weak to holy. This game has optional events where you can spend half of a run fighting for a bonus reward that will be irrelevant to the final boss you've targeted for that session – or any boss for that matter. And the ability to meaningfully buildcraft is in constant tension with *Nightreign*'s pace and its UI, which obfuscates key information around damage scaling and weapon abilities.

Nightreign is kind of a mess. FromSoftware's inscrutable terminology and uneven balance makes the learning curve much steeper than it needs to be. Or maybe that's the beauty of it: a game not trying to entice you with daily login bonuses or battle passes, but a language to learn over the course of hundreds of runs. In that way, it emulates the joys of gaining acuity with any of the studio's other games. But that might also be why the structure of *Nightreign* falls apart for me. If you hated running back to a boss in *Elden Ring*, try doing that with a whole-ass battle royale to survive on the way there.

PASSIVE BENEFITS

It's hard to enjoy the journey when the destination is the only thing you're meaningfully rewarded for. Each character in *Nightreign* can equip three Relics with passive benefits that range from unnoticeable (dexterity +2) to game-changing (item effects or healing flasks are shared with all players). Most of them are trash and will have little to

HOT DROP

Key points of interest



CHURCH
Loot every single one of these for an extra healing flask charge.



EVERGOAL
Always take Stone Sword Keys to summon a boss at these.



CAMP
This is how you find weapons with the right element for the Nightlord.



TUNNEL
Caves with upgrade materials for your weapons, worth a detour.



Nightreign's story is largely self-contained.



TOP LEFT: Just popping out, via Spectral Hawk, to pick up the latest issue of PC PowerPlay magazine.



LEFT: Remembrance quests fill in the backstory of each playable character.



The map is full of familiar bosses from Elden Ring.



Each characters has their own strengths and weaknesses.



RIGHT: Nightlords are definitely some of FromSoftware's most challenging bosses.

TOP RIGHT: Relics give you passive bonuses to bring into each run.



Coordination is the key to overcoming Nightreign's difficulty.



In Limveld, there's no fall damage.

no bearing on whether or not you can kill the final boss, let alone reach them. But that's all that you get to take home after each run.

BUILD-BRAINED

Nightreign wants you in it for the love of the game, and while I can appreciate that in a sea of games that practically bribe you to keep playing, it can also make the routine moments of a run kind of boring. *Elden Ring* has its punishing sections, but there's always something else to do. In *Nightreign*, you just fight bosses until you're strong enough to fight a different boss. When my team cut down the final one, I couldn't think of many reasons compelling me to do it all over again.

But later, I watched a recording of the fight and saw that the final sliver of health on a boss we'd attempted at least six times was extinguished by the tiny magical daggers summoned by my sword's passive effect. And that's when the gears started turning.

What if I found that weapon again and actually played the right character with the right items to emphasise that technique? What other effects have I ignored that could inspire entirely new strategies? I immediately wanted to go for another run as an experiment. Uh oh. It's possible *Nightreign* rules, actually.

WEAPON COMBOS

The combinations of weapons and effects you can put together in a run frequently activate my RPG-build neurons. Part of the reason we even made it to the point where the final boss was nine magic glintblades away from death is that I discovered the 'successive attacks negate damage' passive effect.

On most of *Nightreign*'s eight playable characters it's hard to activate, but it naturally synergises with the dual-wielding knife specialist Duchess' playstyle. Though she's normally one of the squishiest nightfarers, a flurry of stabs into a boss and I could tank an attack that would take my teammates out in one hit. Paired with a Relic that automatically activates her skill to repeat damage done to a boss after landing several hits in a row and I was playing an immortal god. The

problem is you won't find those buffs every run – or on the right character.

But when you do, the thrill of having that kind of power in a FromSoft game is delicious, especially when the difficulty is as brutal as *Nightreign*'s. The RNG of it all and the number of bosses standing between you and the end demands a high level of execution and luck. You get better at knowing what locations to hit each night, but if the drops don't serve you, the run can go sour quickly.

In *Fortnite*, the odds are stacked against you. In *Nightreign* the odds

are the same, except most of the time the game wins. This feels backwards to how I've always approached FromSoft games, but the elation of finally getting a win can be tantalising. And that's all it takes to pull me back in. It doesn't matter whether it's a silly weapon I want to try again or a different character I want to learn, like the witch who can yank magic out of enemies to buff her allies. Every time I get a taste of victory, I forget the misery of spending 30 minutes to lose to a boss and hit the button to do it again anyway.

All of *Nightreign*'s faults fade when the brutal difficulty and the

randomised nature of it creates something beautiful, like when you discover the skeletons summoned by the little necromancer girl can revive you when you're downed. Or when you're fighting a jellyfish god from another planet and your buddy in *Skyrim* armour screams as he rises into the sky on a giant rock, saving you from a big attack. Or when you're low on healing flasks and praying for an easy boss and out from the dark portal steps a nightmare from an entirely different game, one you thought you'd never have to face again. Sometimes *Nightreign* is so cruel all you can do is laugh as it shoves your nose in the dirt.

BRUTAL BUT BRILLIANT

But then it turns around and delivers catharsis. Everyone cheered in voice chat when Centipede Demon, the boss nobody remembers from *Dark Souls*, showed up to get obliterated by 14 years of action RPG combat advancement. When the stars align – and they will – *Nightreign* is unlike anything else I've played.

I just wish it wasn't so hard to play – not because the bosses are tough, but because of how indifferent it is to helping you experience everything that's so endearing about it. All the work is on you to find something that draws you back in, to find a reason to try again. For me that's a new build or a new character to focus on with a game-changing Relic setup. For others it can be helping out a friend struggling with the brutal difficulty. And for something as experimental and as weird as *Nightreign* is, that might be enough.

Nightreign is light on story, but it carries with it my favourite theme core to all of FromSoft's games: the irresistible urge to persevere against what feels like impossible odds. That I can spend three hours getting pummelled by a game as impenetrable as this and still feel the urge to give it another go has me annoyed that the same trick's working on me again. *Nightreign* may be kind of a mess, but it's a mess made just for me. ■



THE HOLY TRINITY

The power of teamwork in *Nightreign*



WYLDER
Balanced class. Can keep an enemy's attention and stick them with explosives for massive damage.

IRONEYE
An archer: marks enemies and increases the damage they take from your party.

DUCHESS
Agile, she has a unique dash and can repeat the last few seconds of damage to a boss.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Nightreign isn't the *Elden Ring* co-op experience you'd expect, but it's still kind of brilliant.

80

TOUGE PARTY

JDM: JAPANESE DRIFT MASTER has grand ambitions, but the execution drifts off course

By Phil Iwaniuk

You'll remember the drift events in classic *Need for Speed*. During that era when the games were soundtracked by crunk songs, told quasi-Fast and Furious tales and reached Christmas number one in the charts, *NFS* introduced drifting as a sort of side-show. There was a totally different physics model underpinning it, one that made ordinary driving nigh-impossible but allowed for some outrageous skidding about in search of a high score.

JDM understands the nostalgic appetite for that era of *NFS* game – you can tell that by its car collection of noughties *NFS* cover stars. But its ambitions are far higher than the throwaway drift events in EA's racers, and in fact higher than those games in their entirety.

Is it versatile enough to make ordinary driving and drifting alike feel good? It is not. Using either arcade or sim physics, trying to drive your car conventionally around the narrow suburban streets of *JDM*'s fictional Japanese burgh always feels a bit awkward and that only comes to the fore when you race in track events. Fortunately, the physics are spot on.

And that's why I completely forgive it for not being *Forza Horizon* in a straight line. Once the steering angles are applied, it's an odyssey of

tyre smoke and revs bouncing off the limiter. There's such a pure sense of gratification to holding a drift angle in parallel with the angle of a turn, reminiscent of pulling off a nice long grind in *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*. It's enough to make you care about drifting as much as Gaming Factory does.

How many games let you clutch-kick during a drift, or mess about with your wheel alignment angle to fine-tune the sensation of mid-corner control? But *JDM* does, because it seems determined to be the alpha and omega of this one thing. And that's smart. A small independent project like this isn't going to topple *Need or Speed*, but it can put its flag in one specific piece of its territory.

You know how it goes with ambitious, eccentric passion projects, though: there are rough edges. And

An odyssey of tyre smoke and revs bouncing off the limiter

NOUGHTIES BUT NICE

Four cars that evoke classic *NFS*



MAZDA RX8
Get a load of that Wankel engine. So 2000s you can almost hear Usher.



NISSAN 370Z
The distinctive curved lines and 'look at me' green of a modern classic.



NISSAN SILVIA
We've all put a gross widebody kit on one of those in our time.



SUBARU BRZ
A staple from *NFS 2015* onwards, in mandatory Scooby blue.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open-world racer with drift physics and life sim elements

EXPECT TO PAY
\$43

DEVELOPER
Gaming Factory

PUBLISHER
Gaming Factory, 4Divinity

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7 9700K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/1153410/JDM_Japanese_Drift_Master/

boy, you could lose a few layers of skin brushing against this thing.

Know that I take no pleasure in reciting this list. There are translation issues: an early tutorial message explains how 'breaking' to slow the car works. There are optimisation issues, too. I'm fine with not hitting max settings if the pixel fidelity's appropriately high, but *JDM*'s scenes just don't justify the chug. Loading screens linger for longer than they should. Route-setting on the mini-map's a lottery. There are odd difficulty spikes, and other events at which the AI drivers seem hapless.

It leaves you with the sense that there's a brilliant game in here which isn't releasing in its final form. But since this isn't an Early Access release, and indeed Gaming Factory ran a demo and collected plenty of feedback from it this year, it's odd to see it's still a rough sketch of a game.

However: mechanically and (for the most part) conceptually, I really like the game. I want it to succeed. It's so inventive with its mission types, switching between *Crazy Taxi*-esque sushi delivery runs and duels against unfriendly locals.

It's generous with its unlocks and currency rewards too. It actually wants you to buy all the cars and tune them so that they feel like your own. And it really succeeds as a walk-in encyclopaedia of Japanese tuner and touge culture, taking every opportunity to add another tidbit about the discipline's evolutions.

And over the course of the next year or so, its rough edges probably will be sanded down. Probably. I can only play and evaluate the game as it appears today though, and that game doesn't always let *JDM*'s best qualities shine. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

JDM seems more preoccupied with throwing another idea in than polishing what's already there.

72

It's your classic Toyota AE86 to riches story. Inspirational stuff.



FAR LEFT: Both performance and visual upgrade options are impressively exhaustive.



LEFT: Factors that affect drift score: speed, duration, angle, and not crashing into that barrier.



It's often easier to build up your drift score on straights than in corners, weirdly.

ALL BY MYSELVES

Fraught and flexible, **THE ALTERS** expertly blends storytelling with survival

By Kerry Brunskill

Jan's the only survivor of an intergalactic mining operation that's gone horribly wrong, and he's the last person anyone would hope was the last person standing in an 'all alone on an alien planet so hostile just standing around outside could kill someone' scenario. He's also going to be burned into a cosmic crisp in a matter of days unless I get on top of this mess right now.

So my first few in-game days in *The Alters* are spent running around in a blind panic, trying to patch Jan's base-in-a-giant-wheel up as quickly as possible so I can get the hell away from wherever here is before the sun rises and soaks the land in its deadly rays.

With the stakes being so high from the moment the game begins, I make a real effort to squeeze every last minute's worth of work out of Jan, sending him scurrying outside for precious resources and running around inside to create life-saving items from the raw materials he's found.

Working him to the bone sounds like the obvious choice in this high-stress situation, but I can't do that either. If I make him work for too long it'll slow him down, and if I ignore his tiredness and carry on (because death by sunlight is only a few days away) he might even collapse, which is even worse than taking a break right in the middle of an important task to get some sleep.

I'm stressed out now, trying to do ten jobs all at once as one person. Enthralled, too. I can't leave Jan in the middle of this mess, not when it looks like there's a real chance I could finally get on top of things and roll him away to safety.

HELPING MYSELF

What I didn't realise at the time was that this was the game's idea of gently easing me in. This was the simple part. The nice part. And I was never more than one scripted malfunction Jan's not equipped to deal with away from disaster. No

matter how hard I tried, solo success was never an option. Performing illegal and deeply immoral experiments involving this hostile rock's unique element, rapidium, was, though.

Creating altered versions of himself that, thanks to the exploration of quantum 'what-if' alternatives to his own life, have vastly differing skills and personalities, isn't Jan's idea. But the people who offered

him this surreal chance to survive are very interested in his success – maybe even interested enough to put some extra effort into rescuing

No matter how hard I tried, solo success was never an option

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Harsh survival expertly coupled with an intriguing sci-fi story

EXPECT TO PAY
\$TBA

DEVELOPER
11 bit studios

PUBLISHER
11 bit studios

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900HX, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
11bitstudios.com

him if he can deliver the results they're after.

It's an awful situation that highlights *The Alters*' brilliance. Every new twist seems to ratchet up the tension, and for every problem (temporarily) solved three new ones pop up at once to make up for it – and how I personally choose to deal with them has a lasting impact on everything that happens afterwards.

I could take everyone I speak to at face value, be a good little corporate employee, and rush to agree with whatever they demand. Or I could turn it all into a tense game of cat and mouse. I can be as evasive as they are, I can go behind their backs and reach out to others, and I can encourage my Alters to go against the wishes of these mysterious people and stick with me. Myself. It's complicated.

SELF LOVE

What I agree to and how I behave has as much of an impact on the day-to-day running of my base as it does the way the story goes and the epilogue I end up with. It was nice to see a Jan happily humming to themselves as we passed each other in the elevator in what passes for the morning here. I do want to make the Alters happy – they're all reflections of Jan, after all – and like everything else these interactions can go from ordinary problem solving to all-out stress in an instant. One minute I'm just trying to cheer a slightly reserved Jan up, the next I'm venturing into radioactive territory for extra metals because I agreed to build a social room so the Jans could watch movies and play beer pong together.

These optional tasks – providing everyone with decent food, finding and then giving someone an item that means a lot to them – may not appear to directly contribute to the group's survival but they help foster a warm and productive environment, which is at least as important as not dying today when locked up with nothing but other versions of yourself.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

I mean me. Us. Them. You know?



TECHNICIAN JAN
The first Alter isn't thrilled about the situation, or shy about letting people know.



REFINER JAN
Laid-back and almost impossibly positive, this Jan wants to work – and chill – out.



DOCTOR JAN
Wildly different from the rest, this highly ethical Jan is a fantastic cook.



WORKER JAN
This Jan's a combative union man who loves the thought of sticking it to The Man.

Spending time together can improve every Jan's mood.

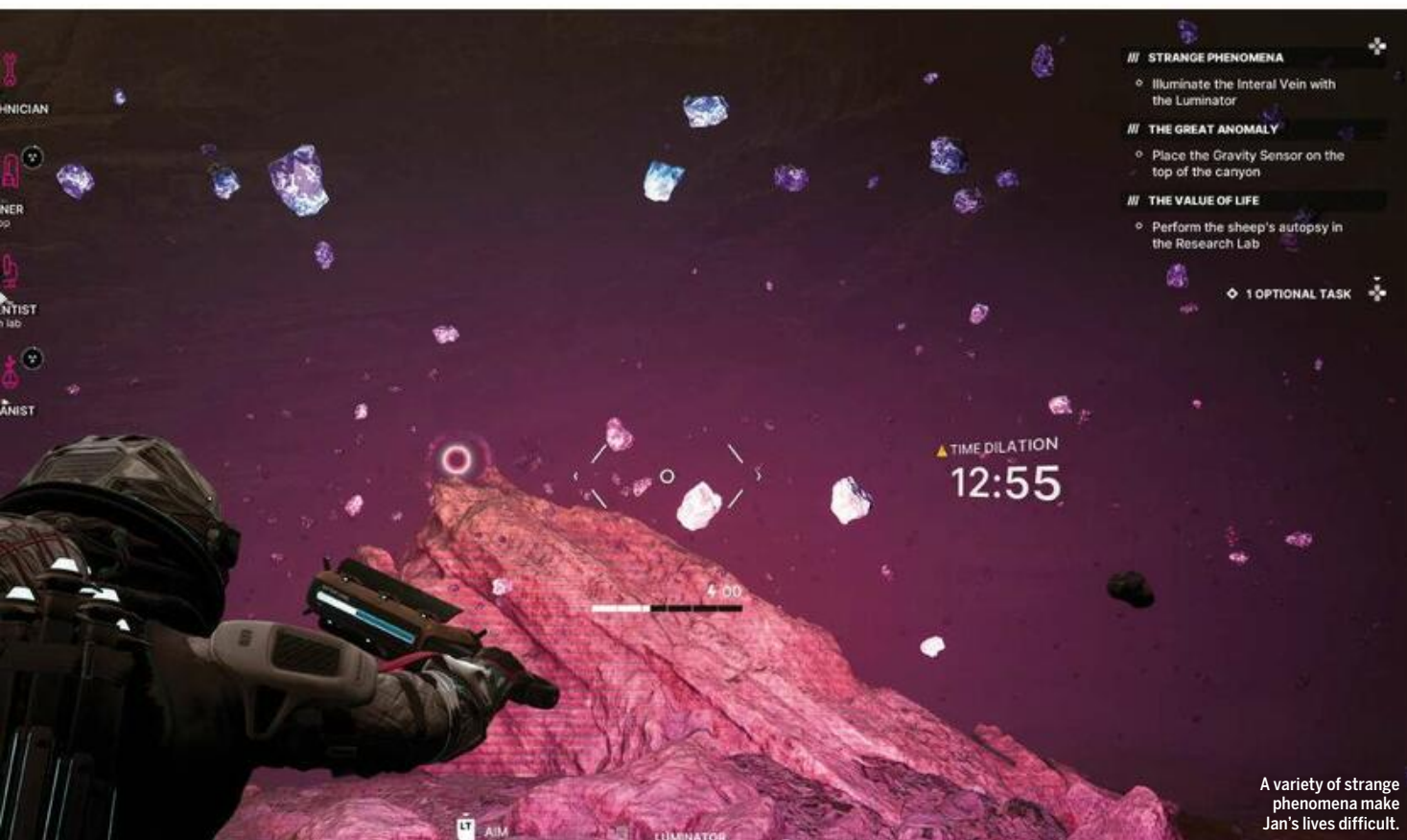


The base shines like a sanctuary in the gloom.



TOP LEFT: Scanning for resources is essential to Jan's survival.

LEFT: Jan's life path offers glimpses of chances missed – and new opportunities.



A variety of strange phenomena make Jan's lives difficult.

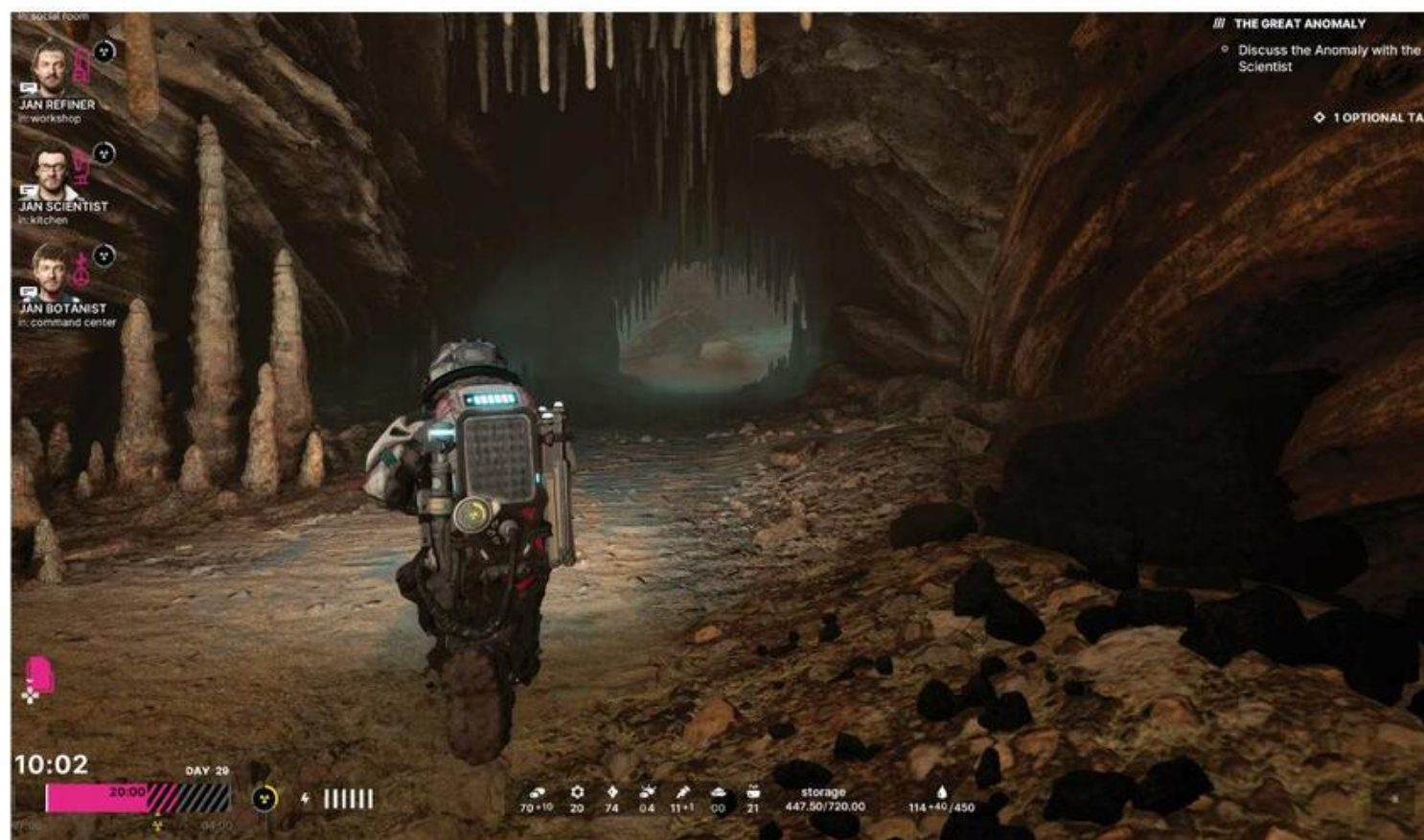
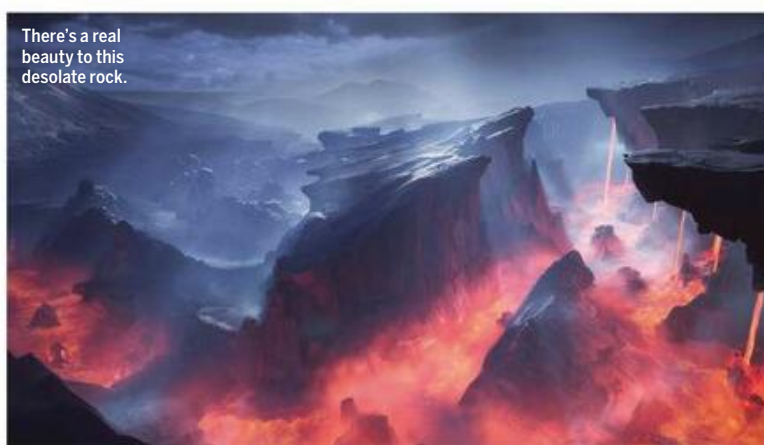


TOP RIGHT: New facilities can be added as required.

BELOW RIGHT: Baa! Say hi to Molly.



There's a real beauty to this desolate rock.



It doesn't feel like extra work because the results are always immediate and obvious. Deep conversations with other Jans can unlock new personality-based dialogue choices – an assertive reply, for example. And the Alters are as likely to talk to each other as they are to me, and these are conversations I can casually overhear as I walk by on my way to another task.

Not that the results are always good. These Jans can not only fight amongst themselves, but they can even fight with the original Jan too, a worrying 'rebellion' stat individually tracked for all of them that can lead to some dangerous results.

I just have to learn to deal with these bumps in the road, as there's no magical perfect response that always makes every Jan happy. Some will be more pragmatic, caring more about survival than home comforts. Some would rather see my Jan push back when cornered than try to find common ground. Thankfully I'm not left blindly guessing who prefers what. Clear pop-ups appear whenever someone's mood changes, and every Alter's life branch offers an easily skimmed timeline of their major life events and how they reacted to them.

GETTING OUT THERE

Whatever the latest chaos, there's always something specific to aim for, even if the what and how to go about it evolves as time goes on. The unique and always deadly areas each chapter

takes place in are handcrafted and relatively compact, rather than auto-generated nothings for me to grab 20 of one thing and 30 of another in before rolling the base off somewhere else. There are blockages to blast away with lasers, prime mining spots to uncover, cargo drops to retrieve, shortcuts to discover and

mysterious phenomena to research – if I dare to spend a little time on them, that is. There's always a point to me being here, specifically, that there is something worth discovering in the latest range of rock and danger.

Finding and then mining resources is an engaging process in this hazardous terrain, combining my own personal knowledge with physical problem solving. It's not enough to simply find metals or raw rapidium, I need to then uncover the perfect spot for the mining machine, and then set up a network of pylons to power it from my base.

Mindless traipsing about in the gloom is kept to a minimum thanks to a convenient fast travel system, allowing me to hop between the base and any operational mining outpost or travel pylon I've established. Working outwards in this way turns this system into more than a convenient way to pop out, or get a head start on further exploration. It's my own self-made flag planted in the radioactive dirt, every bit of help I have proof of something I've personally achieved against the odds.

It took me a while to realise I wasn't building some cute automated

process, machines busily whirring away while I slept or got on with other equally important tasks, but had to manually dedicate hours each day to operating everything myself. Every piece of machinery is built by hand in the workshop. Every mining operation is performed in person. And if there's a storm raging outside and I really need to secure some more materials? I'll just have to head outside anyway and get the job done.

Or ask someone else to do it. Wherever I am, I can easily assign fresh jobs to anyone at any time, and I can also auto-queue orders for anything I need regularly (food, for example), saving me the tedium of personally overseeing the production of mundane but necessary items. My Alters are proactive too, and will ask if they should work on something else the instant they finish up with their assigned task.

A FIGHTING CHANCE

The Jans are not alone on the planet, and while I'm exploring the surface I'll often get attacked by strange anomalies capable of flooding Jan's suit with deadly levels of radiation. On paper, combating these mostly clear and barely-defined wiggles in reality sounds like the weak link in a strong package – I aim a special torch at the ball in them until they go away. But in this context, these simplistic encounters are just what's needed. They're slightly unpredictable hazards that make the landscape feel more dangerous than it would have been without them, without being so challenging or complex to deal with I have to stop everything and pretend I'm playing a shooter for a couple of minutes. Jan just isn't that kind of guy, and this isn't that kind of game.

The Alters is tough, relentless, unforgettable – and highly replayable for a game with such a strong narrative. Every conversation choice I make inside the base matters, and every action I take outside of it has equal weight and meaning. With lots of possibilities for all the Jans and rarely any definitively correct choice of action, this anxiety-filled adventure is always one of my own making. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Wildly unpredictable but always enjoyable, *The Alters* is a masterclass in high-tension gaming.

90

The Alters are as likely to talk to each other as they are to me

WHEELS LIKE HOME

Jan's base combines fun with function



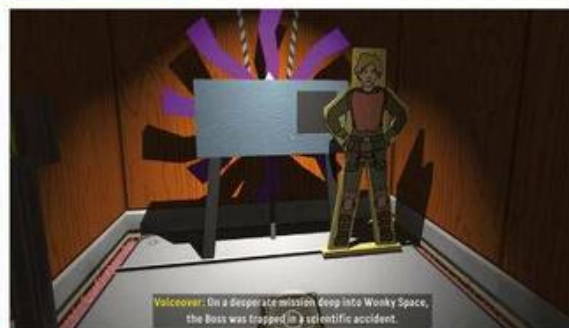
1 CAPTAIN'S CABIN
Jan 01 gets the big bed.

2 KITCHEN
Equally great for heartwarming moments and some intense domestic drama.

3 RECYCLER
Don't ask what it's recycling.

4 THE WOMB
Where Alters are born, whether they like it or not.





ABOVE: Little Lion is Nina's oldest friend. He's also a cat.

FAR RIGHT: Help stations serve as mid-mission save points, but also reveal the locations of guards, cats and airlocks.



Skin Deep is excellent at conveying information to the player, as evidenced by this handy wrist-mounted minimap.



BURROWING IN

SKIN DEEP, Blendo's first game in seven years, is a small triumph

By Morgan Park

Skin Deep lays bare a truth about the immersive sims we anoint to holiness: beneath a veneer of grizzled assassins and sunglassed corpo agents, beyond the virtues of player choice and non-linear level design, is a genre by and for goofballs. The allure of a hackable computer or pickable pockets is catnip for troublemakers – a licence to orchestrate pranks on NPCs who can't send you to the principal's office, and laugh in their faces.

Immersive sims are the sacred virtualisation of shenanigans, and *Skin Deep* is the patron saint of slipping on banana peels.

Death by peel is only the 15th

funniest way I've solved a problem in *Skin Deep*, Blendo Games' latest, built with the 21-year-old id Tech 4 engine. In the bare feet of Nina Passadena, a MIAO Corp deep freeze insurance commando

deployed to save crews of cats from invading pirates, I've sent guards into sneezing fits with boxes of pepper, turned soap into an explosive, flushed myself down a trash chute to make a quick escape and subjected an entire pirate crew to ear-splitting jazz.

Such is the zany, charmingly Die Hard setup behind *Skin Deep*'s sandboxes: Nina is outnumbered, outgunned and literally shoeless, but she still holds all the cards.

It would have been in line with genre tradition to give players a gun from the jump, and I suspect easier to design open-ended levels around, but Blendo's characteristic distaste for the usual is *Skin Deep*'s secret sauce. Nina's empty pockets constantly pushed me to intimately learn spaces and look for utility in mundane objects. There is no random tat in *Skin Deep*. Desk succulents are sneeze bombs, electrical conduits are baseball bats and broken glass is an accident waiting to happen.

Skin Deep nurtures player experimentation with its ingenious Zoom Lens – a generous information gathering tool that lets Nina read notes, labels and stickers from any

distance. Not only were these environmental clues often funny, but they taught me everything I needed to know about what I was holding without drowning in tutorials.

Among the best and deepest stealth sandboxes I've ever played in

SIM SLAPSTICK

The complex simulation at the core of *Skin Deep* has a way of turning best-laid plans into predictably unpredictable Buster Keaton routines. Like the time I helped a

guard kill himself when he shot the window behind me, sucked all the oxygen out of the bridge, then

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sneaky immersive sim from the makers of *Quadrilateral Cowboy*

EXPECT TO PAY
\$29

DEVELOPER
Blendo Games

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9 9900KS,
32GB RAM,
Nvidia GeForce
RTX 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
No

STEAM DECK
Verified

LINK
blendogames.com/
skindeep

suffocated. As I climbed back into the ship in zero-G, a key bonked the lever that seals up window breaches.

I'm still thinking about how that key just happened to smack the window seal. It's the moment I fell hard for *Skin Deep*, because only the best videogames consider every moving object a valid projectile.

You see, the Numb Bunch pirate gang is equipped with jarred noggins that, if killed, detach from the body and magically return to a regeneration pad. The only way to permanently take a piece off the board is to dump them into space.

It's such a nice, tidy, almost annoyingly clever system. *Skin Deep* is overflowing with small but smart touches that could've only come from the mind of someone with strong opinions about the sophistication of modern stealth games.

By the time I rolled credits, there was no question that *Skin Deep* is among the best and deepest stealth sandboxes I've ever played in. Its only major flaw is that stealth sandboxes are all it has to offer, and they suffer from sameness. Ixn 11 hours, I was surprised my goals never evolved past saving cats and escaping the ship. That lack of thematic variety ends up mattering, because *Skin Deep*'s level design can go ten rounds with all the immersive sim greats, but they inevitably blur together.

The truth is that new immersive sims don't come around very often, so I could've settled for something half as interactive, surprising, or downright weird as *Skin Deep*, but that's not what Blendo does. *Skin Deep* is peak improv problem-solving unmarred by the dour dystopias this genre is built on. ■

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The unlikely utility belt of *Skin Deep*'s world



BANANA

Throw to squish on impact and create a perfect slip trap, or eat first for a quick snack that replenishes Nina's health.



BLACK PEPPER

Throw or otherwise damage to create a cloud that causes enemies to sneeze, opening them up for attack.



WALKIE TALKIE

The ultimate multitool of *Skin Deep* used to track guards, call off alarm states, or create a spark for explosions.



TRASH CHUTE

A mainstay of every feline barge, the trash chute will flush anything (or anyone) on top of it into the vacuum of space.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

An indulgent masterclass in immersive sim shenanigans, but lacking a standout level you'll be telling friends about.

88

ROUGH GEM

BLADES OF FIRE doesn't quite manage to bring the heat

By Kerry Brunskill

Blades of Fire doesn't do itself any favours pairing Aran, its rugged action hero with godlike powers, a tragic past, and a broken heart, up with a much younger sidekick he insists on calling 'boy' and 'kid' far too often – but cracking through the Kratos of it all reveals a game that's trying to leave a more exploration-heavy mark on the cinematic action genre. These are places to be savoured, not slaughtered.

The game truly believes that taking the time to explore its rustic fantasy locales, poking around sandy ruins and enormous crumbling castles instead of rushing from one waypoint to the next, is the heart of the experience. So much so that the game defaults to the hardest difficulty setting, the only one that doesn't allow me to bring up a convenient 'go here next' map marker whenever I'm feeling a bit lost. And for a while, it's magical.

There's always some out-of-reach place I can't help but wonder how to get to close by, and every small deviation off the beaten path seems to hold some shortcut or stat boost. Everywhere I go looks gorgeous, whether covered in snow or sand, or blood, and I did enjoy entering new areas just to see what gorgeous vista I was going to be treated to next.

ONE MORE THING

Actually trying to progress through these areas is another matter. The first dozen or so hours contain not one but two hours-long 'drag the NPC around if you want to get anything done' gimmicks, one of which revolves around a crying child. Pushing further on only leads me to an endless parade of increasingly frustrating and flimsy roadblocks, the game

making me stand right in front of the one thing/gate I needed to activate/unlock to move on... just so it can explain why it [in]conveniently isn't working right now. Too often I was sent off to gather several key items split across multiple unrelated zones first, or had to retrieve something I used once in a completely different location, hours ago, for the sake of a single barrier. Not even free fast

Attacks with the heavy weapons feel wonderfully weighty

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Another action game starring a buff gruff sad man

EXPECT TO PAY
\$85

DEVELOPER
MercurySteam

PUBLISHER
505 Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900HX, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bladesoffire.com

travel, available at any of the sensibly-placed rest/repair/forging anvils scattered around, was enough to soften the repeated hammer blows to the game's pacing.

The 'boy' that sticks by Aran's side through all this is Adso, a young scholar who takes notes and draws illustrations in his journal as I play. When complete, these notes are a nice mix of lore and genuinely useful battle information, with the two combining nicely. I can learn why a boss has a particular attack, as well as what I should do about it.

Unfortunately, Aran and Adso struggle to go two minutes without engaging in some sarcastic bants. In cutscenes this can lead to some funny moments, but I really could have done without hearing the same small selection of quips whenever there's a button to push or, at its most grating points, a ladder or rope to climb. I can send him back to camp whenever I want some peace and quiet, but that just leaves me with a half-empty journal (Adso can't record things he hasn't seen, after all) and sometimes without the one person I need to activate a lever on the opposite wall.

At least he's invincible, so I'm free to focus on mowing down the vast hordes standing between Aran and the end of his quest.

TO SHREDS

My controller's face buttons match the direction of Aran's swings – hitting the Y button at the top unleashes an overhead smash, while tapping B results in a slash from his right. It makes sense immediately and allows me to create some smooth combos on the fly, switching between piercing pokes and broad sweeps with ease. Attacks with the heavy weapons feel wonderfully weighty, while smaller swords, axes and daggers are light and agile in Aran's coal-stained hands.

These directional attacks aren't just for show either. Locking on to an enemy brings up a colour-coded

DEAD GOOD

The vitality-challenged can be a friendly bunch



BONEY

This tiny undead child only wants constant cuddles and protecting from hordes of monsters. That's fair.



MOANY

He may be cowardly and forgetful, but every now and then the necropolis' gravekeeper comes through.



GLOWY

Silent but helpful, this mysterious Blue Lady is always happy to imbue Aran's weapons with useful powers.





BELOW LEFT: Guess how I found out you can walk straight off high ledges?



A well-timed dodge can be a real lifesaver.



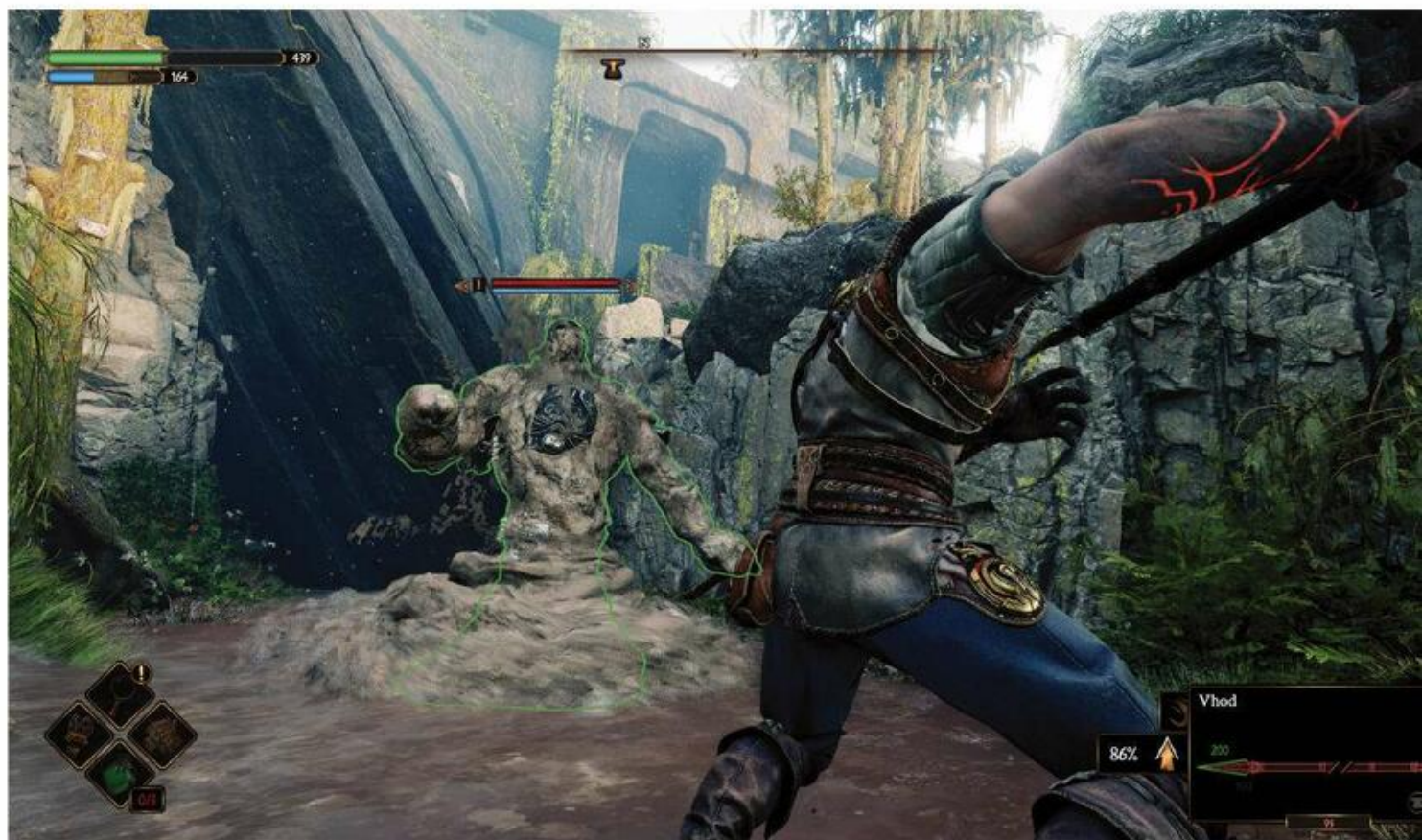
They're best friends. Honest.



RIGHT: Keep calm, carry on, and try not to get eaten.

TOP RIGHT: The architecture is rarely anything short of incredible.

BELOW: Coloured outlines show how effective my current weapon will be.



outline, showing how vulnerable each of the four major areas of their body are to Aran's currently equipped weapon – and where an attack will be so ineffective it'll just bounce off.

In theory this brings some tactics into my fights – I'm supposed to aim for the green bits, treat the orange as second best, and actively avoid the red – but by and large enemies are just one uniform colour, and if that colour is anything other than green I just switch to a more effective weapon Aran has assigned to a quick slot (he can have up to four at a time, with more available via the equipment screen) and carry on as normal.

GREEN MEANS BLOW

This colour coding is tied to my weapon's stats and damage type, instead of anything my opponent's wearing, divorcing what I'm seeing from what I have to do. A guy completely sealed in plate mail? Green. Weird skinny thing with obvious exposed areas? Maybe some orange or red in there. For all this tinted targeting, my tactical opportunities are limited to hurting them a little or a lot. I can't make an effort to hack off a powerful enemy's sword arm, leaving them weaponless, or force a quick monster to stumble with a series of low blows.

It doesn't help that there's little practical difference between most common enemy types; they're all just fodder for the end of my blades. One dagger guy is very much like any other dagger guy, no matter how they're dressed up or what difficulty setting I'm playing on. And those that do require me to change up my techniques are, a bit too often, just That Guy From Before: On Fire Edition or some other obvious remix. By and large, the battle tactics I was using 30 minutes in were unchanged 30+ hours later – as were the attacks being used against me.

The rare boss battles were thankfully much better, offering an enjoyable combination of genuine challenge, cinematic climaxes, and truly unique phases and mechanics I had to learn and then perfect. Well-timed dodges, blocks and parries are essential if I want to survive the lightning blasts, blades and fiery magic sent my way. I'm

encouraged to pay close attention to my own positioning and closely read my opponent's behaviour, while dealing with situations I have never experienced before or since.

HAMMER IT OUT

This naturally led to more than a few lost or broken weapons along the way, which need to either be retrieved and repaired or abandoned and then forged anew (materials willing). I expected to hate everything about this system. I am so over watching out for durability and

breakages and wasting my time crafting things out of spare parts. So I was surprised to see just how quickly *Blades of Fire* won me over.

Unless I deliberately go swinging a less sturdy weapon at the nearest rock, durability is something to generally keep in mind rather than constantly fuss over, and I never, ever, needed to carry a small army's worth of identical swords with me. Instead I ended up with a favourite undead-bopping polearm, as well as a sword I was sad to have to recycle for parts after I'd used it until it couldn't be repaired any more, and a pair of axes I cared for like they were my kids.

The in-depth forging process does a fantastic job of making whatever I

create truly feel like mine from the moment Aran stands in front of the design slate with chalk in hand, allowing me to select everything from the weapon's handle type to the end point shape and the exact materials used for each major part too; every decision altering its speed, reach, balance, and more. I'm then made to hand-hammer the molten metal into its final shape, 'feeding' the thinner areas from the 'lumps' by carefully pushing them along the line, the angle and strength of my blows deciding how many one-click repairs the final weapon gets.

It's even possible to auto-forge something to the highest quality already reached for that weapon type, greatly speeding up the process when forging an upgrade or just creating a handy spare. There were times I chose not to even if I could, because it was so satisfying to do it myself.

So sometimes it sparkles like a diamond, but I still came away from my time with the game thinking it would have been twice as good if they'd dared to make it half as long.

The lack of enemy variety and reactivity wouldn't have been so obvious if they'd shaved a good ten hours off the nigh 40-hour run time. A major plot twist made me groan in frustration, game-long goalposts suddenly moved to shift the focus onto a character who before that point had been given about as much depth and screen time as the farting ogre with a comedy moustache I'd suffered through earlier. The odd bout of fetch-questing can be a great excuse to revisit an old area with a fresh pair of eyes, but too often I'm made to act like a bored fantasy courier, sometimes for people who can fly, rather than a brave hero.

Even so, I like it. It looks beautiful, smashing skeletons to bits with a giant axe feels fantastic, and Aran and Adso are great characters when they're not slipping into some 'God of War via Marvel' routine again. *Blades of Fire* may not be polished steel, but there is a shining nugget of something good in here; it's just a shame it's often hidden under layers of patience-testing flaws. ■

This colour coding is tied to my weapon's stats and damage type

ALL FIRED UP

How to get properly hammered



PICK A WEAPON TYPE.
New designs are unlocked by killing a certain number of a specific enemy type.



CUSTOMISE IT.
Now's the time to decide whether to specialise in one particular area, or create a solid all-rounder.



HAMMERING IT ALL OUT.
The aim here is to try and get the metal to match the outline, by carefully tapping it into shape.



ENJOY.
Swing your new toy about with wild abandon in a short cutscene. Ooh, shiny!

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

MercurySteam's *Blades of Fire* can be great fun, but unfortunately it definitely overstays its welcome.

74

A messy, but emotional climax.



RECORD SCRATCH

LOST RECORDS: BLOOM & RAGE TAPE 2 leaves more dead space than game

By Autumn Wright

When I sat down to finish *Lost Records*, I realised how deeply the quartet of punk girls finding themselves through riot grrrl had already sunk into my heart. How could they not when I saw so much of myself – who I was, who I wanted to be – in them. It was obvious this would be everyone's last summer together, though with many questions left unanswered, I hoped I could somehow rewind to change things. Instead, *Bloom & Rage Tape 2* leaves mostly dead space.

I want to draw out the wordplay. It's mimetic how *Tape 2* arrives after delays that signal development problems. Bugs and the short length give it away. *Tape 2* is not a whole second part, but a third act. Its flame is burning up too bright, too soon. And so is Kat's, as we find out she is dying of leukaemia. There's some probably unintentional meaning there, and it affects me, though I'm left wanting to see all that could have been.

Tape 2 adds very little new to engage with. As in *Bloom*, I examine intricately modelled objects for clues. I use Swann's camcorder to record

memories and edit together videos. There are gestures towards some iteration that could've been, but there is ultimately very little 'play'.

FIRE WALK WITH ME

I'm left wanting to see all that could have been

When *Tape 2* reaches its narrative and thematic conclusion it feels too fast, but this is almost appropriate given Kat's dwindling vitality. And it's not just Kat who must die. In the finale each girl is beaten, harassed, torn from girlhood, the impetus for their coming-of-age being the death of their innocence to the violence in the world. This grows from the discordant undertones of nostalgia: it

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A choices-filled narrative adventure through '90s girlhood nostalgia

EXPECT TO PAY
\$60

DEVELOPER
Don't Nod Montréal

PUBLISHER
Don't Nod

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10700F, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3060 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

STEAM DECK
Verified

LINK
dont-nod.com/en/games/lost-records-bloom-and-rage

shows gay bashing and intimate partner violence as much a part of a nostalgia for the '90s that remains unspoken, but not unremembered.

This is why *Lost Records*' nostalgia in *Tape 1* has been resonant to so many queer and trans women, why these memories are different from the conservative kind snaking through games culture today. It's all ephemeral. We don't hold onto it. Don't repeat those violences. We realise something like no other has been missing since we were young. Something that can't be replaced. And it's why *Tape 2*'s fire is as much a form of nostalgia as the trinkets and tapes. They say boys will be boys: log on to dox a streamer, harass a dev, rage against a world that let the ashes fly. They never forgot the violence of the '90s. They just miss the flame. ■

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

There's much less game in *Tape 2*, but a strong narrative conclusion is worth seeing. It won't take long, either.

75

BELOW: That's just uncalled for.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
\$15

DEVELOPER
DeadToast Ent

LINK
devolverdigital.com

HELLJOY

The Flash game aesthetic lives on in **SHOTGUN COP MAN**

By Jody Macgregor

Shotgun Cop Man is a throwback to an earlier age of indie games, when 2D puzzle-platformers with a single mechanical hook were all the rage. “In this one you can reverse gravity.” “In this one you can rewind time.” Well, in this one you jump by shooting at Hell.

The plot is wafer-thin: you are a brick-shaped cop man who has descended into Hell to arrest Satan. Satan wears a string vest and each of the game’s nine worlds begins with him telling you to fuck off before buzzing demons lift him away. Do not go into *Shotgun Cop Man* expecting any more story than that.

It’s a game about momentum. Shoot down with your shotgun and you get launched into the air, but

shoot down with a pistol and you do a little hop that’ll let you skip a bullet without braining yourself on overhead spikes. It nails the little details, like the way you stop falling briefly while shooting your pistol, letting you chain together a bunch of air-time kills as you plummet down a shaft full of demons, or the way the thumping music sounds tinny and distant when you’ve been hit and are frantically trying to grab the floating heart that stops you dying.

There’s a level editor and achievements, and yet I can’t see myself going back now I’ve defeated Satan. The moment I finished *Shotgun Cop Man* it left my head completely. This is a one-and-done run, a single-serving treat I enjoyed for five hours. ■

78

MILKY MILKY

Cosy cleanup sim **SPILLED** is peacefully brilliant

By Jody Macgregor

Cleaning the house is never on my list of things I want to do, but somehow in games it’s always one of my favourite things. Be that clearing objectives off of a map or organising inventory, tidying is better in game form. Tiny boat game *Spilled* scratches that itch by having you clean up polluted water to improve the ecosystem.

There’s not much to it. You control a small boat that’s tasked with clearing away slicks of oil, rescuing animals and tidying rubbish. As you bring rubbish back to recycling centres you’ll earn coins to spend on upgrades for your vessel.

There’s a touch of *Powerwash Simulator* about it – it’s incredibly satisfying cutting through swathes of

black muck and watching the water go from poo-brown to crystal clear and full of marine life. There are a few extra missions that see you retrieving extra objects such as beach balls for other boaters and even putting out wildfires when you unlock the hose, but there’s not much else to it. There doesn’t need to be, however. Sometimes simple is all you want and by keeping things pared back, *Spilled* becomes almost meditative. At only 90 minutes long, this cosy boat game doesn’t have much space to waste. Luckily this tale of cleaning up oil spills and putting out fires keeps things tight without any faff or padding. *Spilled* may be short, but every second of it is peacefully brilliant and well worth dedicating a Sunday afternoon to. ■

80

BELOW: You’ll find fetch quests hidden on some levels.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
\$8

DEVELOPER
Lente

LINK
shorturl.at/fo7u6



The Nuribotke is Labyrinth's Mr X: don't bother attacking, just run.



TOP RIGHT: Enemies in-fight, and it's always wiser to let them finish each other off than to get involved.



FAR RIGHT: Where there's dialogue, it's as discomfoting as the environments themselves are.



The Demon King... he has a taste for the flesh of young women...

Long ago... his men stole me and all the other women from my village...

NEXT



No idea what's going on here, but it's a rare example of a colour that's not brown-ish.

A-MAZE-ING CHASE

LABYRINTH OF THE DEMON KING emphasises the horror in classic dungeon crawlers

By Shaun Prescott

Labyrinth of the Demon King is a cruel, miserable dungeon crawler set in a collapsing feudal Japan. I'm a lowly foot soldier, or ashigaru, seeking to avenge the murder of my lord and his army at the hands of the demon king. As you can imagine, the odds are stacked against me. My katana is broken and the labyrinth I'm forced to navigate is the most depressing and confusing entanglement of halls and rooms I've visited since the PS1 era.

This nasty 15-hour adventure belongs to a new generation of dungeon crawlers heavily indebted to *King's Field*. *Labyrinth of the Demon King* trades fantasy for an oppressive commingling of

Buddhist folklore and survival horror grime, while also advancing the complexity of the combat you can expect in games of this ilk.

About that combat: I was ready to give up *Labyrinth of the Demon King* after about the two-hour mark. The game forces a combat tutorial straight out of the gate, but I was nevertheless getting my arse handed to me. My ashigaru is tortoise-slow, with a stamina bar that depletes at an alarming clip with every flailing, poorly timed swing of my katana. Dodging once doesn't deplete my miserly stamina bar, but if I dodge again within a four-second cooldown,

it does, and the penalty is enormous. If I happen to get hit by any of the maddened figures whose attacks I can parry inside a tiny window, I lose my cool and death is certain.

But then I learn to kick. There is a kick button, and for a long time I neglected to use it. Kicking an enemy staggers them for long enough to get a risk-free thrust in, and takes the edge off the otherwise overwhelmingly tense fights.

An oppressive commingling of Buddhist folklore and survival horror

SHADOW TOWERS

The demon's labyrinth is split into four major areas, and aside from some refreshing outdoor sections, it pretty much all looks the same. Every surface is caked in an unspecified brown-grey ooze. Doorways and occasionally whole halls can be blocked by mysterious breathing gore

piles. Many doors, of course, are jammed or locked. It's an oppressively bleak and monotonous world to spend a long time in.

Meanwhile, the enemies themselves are rendered inscrutable by their nascent 3D stylings. It took me a while to realise a merchant cat, for instance, was a cat. When it comes to the demons, the chunky pixels renounce detail and subtlety in favour of a generalised fetidness: it feels like I'm slashing away at a mass of sentient polyps.

There are a bunch of different weapons, all upgradable, ranging from my starter katana through to an otsuchi, a Great Dao, and naginatas, axes, spears – even a rifle, all with different attack speeds and stamina trade-offs. There are also talismans, which I mostly forgot to use, but which have both offensive and defensive capabilities. The difficulty tapers off by the halfway mark, mostly thanks to familiarity with the combat system, but upgrading my health and stamina certainly helped.

Labyrinth of the Demon King is predominantly the work of a single person, JR Hudepohl, and it definitely feels like the result of a productive obsession. I don't know if a team could make something this quietly disturbing without someone piping up to ask: how will people cope? I won't lie: as I watched the credits roll on *Labyrinth of the Demon King* I felt an unutterable sense of relief that I would never need to roam those halls again, with their drones of mysterious provenance, and the wheezing of their gross denizens. But I'm sure glad I did at least once: this is the most potent weird horror we're likely to see in 2025. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A grim first-person dungeon crawler heavily inspired by *King's Field* and early survival horror

EXPECT TO PAY
\$29

DEVELOPER
JR Hudepohl

PUBLISHER
Top Hat Studios

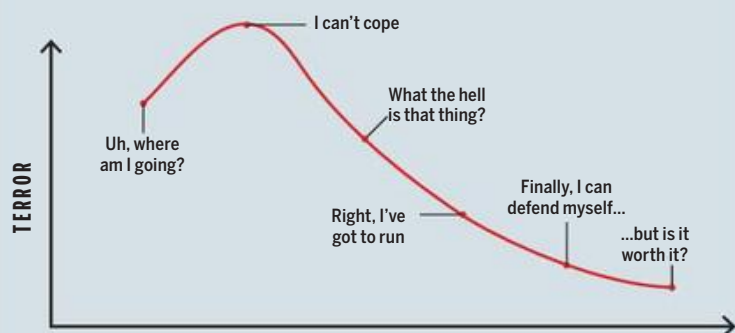
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 5600H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
tophat.studio/games_labyrinthOfTheDemonKing.html

TERROR-OMETER

In the labyrinth, you're either terrified or faintly disgusted



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Offers first-person retro dungeon crawling, but distinguishes itself with its overpowering mood of dread.

81



Feral birds would devour you if you weren't inside the car. It's swings and roundabouts.

CARMAGEDDON

Hell on wheels just about sums up **FUSED 240**

The power of the jump cut is still largely underutilised in games. Was nothing learnt from *Thirty Flights of Loving*? But at long last, here's another narrative-focused adventure that utilises jump cuts to devastating effect. The difference is that, this time, the effect is to induce horror – oh so much horror. *Fused 240* is an impressive work of body horror that imagines a world in which humans have been merged with automobiles.

It all begins with a column of white light, which smacks into you at the beginning of the apocalypse to fuse your body with the car you were driving. Now you're trapped inside it, which would be difficult enough if it were the whole vehicle. But nope, your flesh was grafted into a half-car that trundles slowly around the hellscape, without a working engine.

Occasional cuts to the cramped interior of the trundling vehicle remind us of the person still inside it, in the guts of the machine, and he's frankly not having the best time of it. It's these jump cuts to the reality of his suffering, juxtaposed with static long shots that establish the uncaring wasteland he exists in, that give the game its raw, nightmarish power.

You, the player, are right there with the car-bound protagonist, however, thanks to a control scheme that mimics his lumbering movements. The half-car is only able to move by alternately rocking backwards, and leaning forwards on an extendable claw, and you achieve this by tapping F and N on your keyboard, F and N, over and over. By the end of the game, you can't help but admire the fleshy vehicle for

their – indeed, for your – persistence in the face of such a hostile world.

DRIVE ANGRY

Fused 240 asks you to do this for fairly long stretches of game. F and N, F and N, the camera unchanging from its cold long shot until you're

By the end of the game, you can't help but admire the fleshy vehicle

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A horror adventure among the car people

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Mike Klubnika & Wriks

PUBLISHER
Mike Klubnika & Wriks

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, GeForce
RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/Fused240

suddenly there in the bowels of the car, witnessing the man who has been consumed by the machine – or, in another occasional shot, seeing what he sees through the car's smudged video feed.

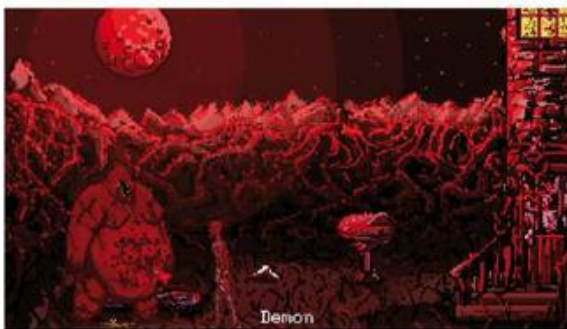
Sometimes you will be asked to use his claw-arm to pick up a can, or to follow behind a fellow survivor whose bottom half happens to be the front half of a car. It's a firmly linear game – in fact, you'll only ever go in a straight line – but fully immersive in its horror until the pitch-black ending. The premise is so powerfully grim, the employment of the camera so expertly done, that it's easy to forgive the sometimes-extraneous dialogue and narration. There's a long chat with the fellow survivor that adds little to the game and threatens to undermine the power of its imagery. A picture of a man fused with his car speaks 1,000 words, as the saying goes. ■

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

A powerful horror game with an arresting premise and masterful use of static camera angles.

80

BELOW: I wasn't expecting the Home Alone reboot to get quite so dark.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Snoring Dog Games

LINK
bit.ly/FlayedMan

EAT FLAY LOVE

Beauty isn't only skin deep in **THE FLAYED MAN**

In this damned good adventure game, you play as a man enduring torment in Hell. A man who has had his skin flayed off, so every step he takes in the course of puzzle-solving is an exquisite agony. Er, sorry about that, *The Flayed Man*, but I'm generally quite slow at solving puzzles.

Another way this skinless chap differs from most adventure game protagonists is that he can't think or speak, at least at first. While it's not long before a demon grants him the ability to comment on the items you examine, it's a little while longer before the flayed man regains his tongue, something that gives this point-and-click a very different flavour from its brethren.

It's something I've never really considered in the genre, but I'm used to the protagonist talking to me as I

try to combine items in the inventory or use them in the environment. It's a little rap on the fourth wall that tells us if we're on the right track or not, and it's usually wrapped up in a little joke or playful insult.

When you try to use items in *The Flayed Man*, he responds by saying "...", which not only makes the puzzle-solving slightly frustrating, but it robs the genre of one of its most enjoyable distinguishing features.

The most accomplished part of the game is its depiction of Hell, which is realised with exquisite pixel art and a thoughtful story that sees you damning, or forgiving, your fellow sinners in a priest's confessional. It's a wonderfully realised setting, with an original protagonist. I've never felt so guilty just asking a character to shamble down a hallway. ■

74

SUIT YOU

PACK sees the satisfaction in packing a suitcase

The mirror image of *Unpacking*, *Pack* is a little game about cramming your possessions into a suitcase, focusing purely on the puzzle aspect of making sure everything fits, and there is no overflow. It's a bit like *Resident Evil 4*'s inventory *Tetris*, only without the grid that would make the process a whole lot easier.

Actually, a better point of reference might be *Ultima VII*, with its inventory system comprised of physical bags, stuffed with little items you had to constantly move to find other little items. *Pack* improves upon the physical inventory concept by not allowing items to overlap. As you drag them into the suitcase one by one, they have to occupy their own little space in it and not get too close to the edge or to each other. It's a satisfying process, if occasionally a

maddening one, as sometimes pixel-perfect precision is required.

Yes, it is a bit unrealistic that you can't stack your possessions on top of each other, and I wish you could rotate them, as in *Resi 4*. But *Pack*'s rendering of physical space is still a lot of fun to play around with, whether you're inserting a cat into a cat carrier or dropping playing cards into a box, one by one. I never thought that packing could be enjoyable, but there's a simple pleasure to fitting things neatly inside a small space, and *Pack* captures that.

The game ultimately goes beyond reality by rendering magical space as well, with a Bag of Holding featuring a Tardis-like interior. Naturally, just as *Pack* is hitting its stride, it abruptly comes to an end. But it feels inevitable that someone will build on the concept in the future. ■

75

BELOW: I've always enjoyed games where you can carry bags within bags.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
plasmastarfish

LINK
bit.ly/PackThings

GROUP TEST

AIR COOLERS

Move aside, liquid cooling: Air coolers are unbeatable on a budget

By Jacob Ridley





It's important to stay cool while gaming, and that applies to you and your processor. Though I only care for one of those things and you won't be getting any grief from me about shouting at your mates on Discord. No, I only care for keeping your CPU running smoothly, and to that end, I've tested six of the latest air coolers to find out how they stack up.

Why go for air cooling over liquid cooling? Those I've tested here are great for two reasons. The first is they're often quieter than a chunky liquid cooler, on account of lacking a pump. You probably won't hear an air cooler over your case fans plus they have fewer fans than many of today's top liquid coolers, which makes for less whine overall. The second is they're excellent value for money.



Freezer 36

ARCTIC \$49

Excellent

1 Cheap, quiet, and it comes in black. Arctic has hit the nail on the head with the design of the Freezer 36. On the surface, it's an air cooler like any other, especially in the silver colourway I've opted for here, but somehow this plucky cooler manages to compete with the very best around, and for significantly less cash.

The Freezer 36 comes with two P12 PWM PST fans. There are RGB options available but otherwise they're relatively low-key, black fans. That said, this cooler operates at a low hum even at 100% speed, and both fans here generate less noise

than the single-fan models tested. Furthermore, I ran a lengthy test in *Metro Exodus Enhanced Edition* and found the Freezer 36 performs as well as larger, more expensive units from Cooler Master and Be Quiet!

From performance alone, you might expect a mid-range price tag slapped on this air cooler. However, it is one of the most affordable. That makes it a very easy recommendation indeed, and absolutely my top pick from the lot.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Cheap
- Top performer
- Quiet

SPECS SIZE: SINGLE-TOWER / **FANS:** 2 / **FAN MODEL:** P12 PWM PST / **RGB LIGHTING:** OPTIONAL

Hyper 612 Apex

COOLER MASTER \$89

Stylish

2 I find the Hyper 612 deeply satisfying to look at. It speaks to me on an primeval level, or something like that. Maybe it's because it's extremely cubular, if such a thing exists, and I tend to like cuboid things, such as Japanese cars. What is that Huey Lewis song? Anyways, back to the 612 Apex.

This is a good-looking cooler that's befitting a sleek, minimalist PC build, but it's pretty capable, too. It's on par with the Freezer 36 for gaming temps in my test, and while more demanding workloads are too great for it, as is the case with all air coolers, it once again

performs on par with the Freezer 36 with a 120W power limit enabled. That shows what it might perform like with a new, efficient processor – the 14700K is quite the power hog.

Those similarities to the Freezer 36 do mean that we have to interrogate the price. Even with a discount applied to it it's more expensive than Arctic's number. That means you are paying for its quirky looks, which may or may not be worth it to you.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Oddly pretty
- Fans on rails
- Bit loud

SPECS SIZE: SINGLE-TOWER / **FANS:** 2 / **FAN MODEL:** MOBIUS 120P / **RGB LIGHTING:** NO

LOOKS TO BE BETTER SUITED
TO A CAR ENGINE THAN A
COMPUTER CHIP



GROUP TEST



Dark Rock 5

BE QUIET! **\$110**

Stealthy

3 If you want an understated PC build, look no further than the Be Quiet! Dark Rock 5. Aside from its silly name, this thing is pretty minimal, with an all-black-out look that is as charming as it is tough to see through a tempered glass window. The Dark Rock 5 performed very well in my testing. Again, some of the more intensive tasks were too much for it, but that's not unusual. Rather it was the closest to the Noctua NH-D15 G2, an absolute whopper of an air cooler, in *Metro Exodus*, and again one of the closest to it, if a little further off this time, during a lengthy lap

around the city streets of Baldur's Gate. It's fairly quiet compared to some, though considering there's only a single Silent Wings 4 fan here, it does look a little loud next to quieter dual-fan models. Though we're talking low noise levels here nonetheless, as most air coolers keep it schtum, another fan would go a long way for the Dark Rock 5. While it's not my favourite chip chiller here for value-for-money, it is a good all-round pick.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- All blacked out
- Easy install
- Single-fan

SPECS SIZE: SINGLE-TOWER / **FANS:** 1 / **FAN MODEL:** SILENT WINGS 4 / **RGB LIGHTING:** NO

NH-D15 G2

NOCTUA **\$269**

Mighty

4 The Noctua NH-D15 G2 looks to be better suited to a car engine than a computer chip. But don't be fooled by its excessively large frame, this is built to ensure your CPU stays chilly. It's the only air cooler in this test to be posited as a rival to an all-in-one liquid cooler, and while I don't quite see it winning that fight, it does get close.

Noctua spent almost a decade designing the new NF-A14x25r G2 fans included on this cooler. There's only 0.7 mm between the fan tip and fan housing, which doesn't leave much room for error. It does appear worth it, however, as if

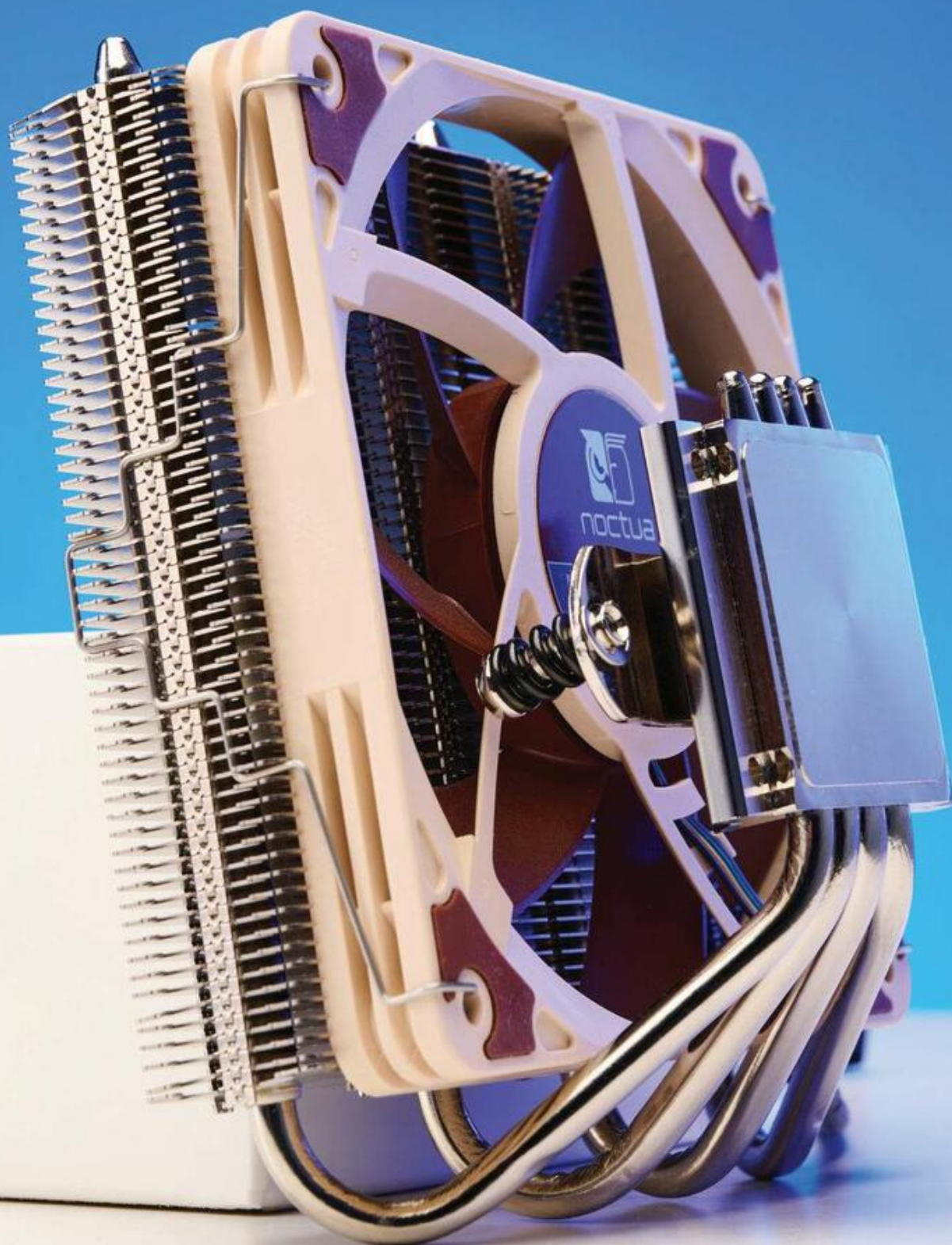
you stick a pair of these onto a dual-tower heatsink with eight heatpipes through it you're looking at better performance than any other air cooler I tested.

But is it really competing with a liquid cooler? Much like the others, it struggled with the 14700K in some tests. But in games, it is pretty close. Considering it costs as much as a liquid cooler, and then some, it's a bit of a niche product, but you have to be impressed by its engineering.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Phwoar
- Huge potential
- Expensive

SPECS SIZE: DUAL-TOWER / **FANS:** 2 / **FAN MODEL:** NF-A14X25R G2 / **RGB LIGHTING:** NO



GROUP TEST

**IF YOU NEED
SOMETHING SLIGHT
THEN THE NH-L12S IS
EXACTLY THAT**



BENCHMARKS

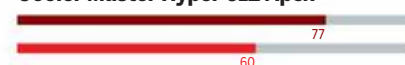
Metro Exodus: Enhanced Edition, Core i7-14700K

■ Max temperature (°C)
 ■ Average temperature (°C)

Arctic Freezer 36



Cooler Master Hyper 612 Apex



Be Quiet! Dark Rock 5



Noctua NH-D15 G2



Cooler Master Hyper 212 Pro



Noctua NH-L12S



Hyper 212 Pro

COOLER MASTER \$49

Flashy

5 The Hyper 212 is a legend, and Cooler Master is still tweaking the formula to this day. This latest iteration comes with an all-black finish and an RGB fan to sweeten the deal. Does it still have what it takes to compete in today's busy market? Yes, if you're running a mid-range or budget processor, but it's tough to ignore the Arctic elephant in the room. The Hyper 212 Pro looks great. The original design has stood the test of time for a while, but it was getting a bit tired in recent years. The all-black finish and accent on the top of the Pro make it look a little more fitting for a PC build in 2025.

The 212 Pro was the hottest (full-size) cooler I tested, and one of the loudest, despite having only one fan. It got into slightly uncomfortable territory while gaming, above the 90°C mark, and only really settled into a good spot with the chip limited to 120W. That's fine for a 120W chip and many popular chips gobble less than that, but since it's a similar price, or more expensive, than the Freezer 36, even if you grab the RGB version, I'd opt for that instead.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- RGB fan included
- Affordable
- Freezer 36 is better

SPECS SIZE: SINGLE-TOWER / FANS: 1 / FAN MODEL: SICKLEFLOW EDGE 120 / RGB LIGHTING: YES

NH-L12S

NOCTUA \$135

Low-profile

6 If you're building a small form factor PC, good luck trying to fit any of the aforementioned air coolers in there. Some cases are better than others for space above the CPU, but most of the time, you need something small and slight to fill the gap. The NH-L12S is exactly that.

I tested this cooler much like any other in this list, on a desktop 14700K PC, though that's a little unfair to it. So I also built a mini PC in the Fractal Design Terra, a PC case no bigger than a bread bin, and that's when I was really impressed by it. The fan slots above or beneath the heatsink,

which means you can keep to the extremely tight tolerances in the Terra while still maintaining active cooling.

You will pay more for the privilege of a tiny PC in many ways, and the NH-L12S is no different. It's a lot of money for a slender chip chiller, that's for sure. Nevertheless, it performs very well with a more sensible CPU under it, such as a Ryzen 7 9700X or a budget chip. Don't go overboard or overclock, and you'll be just fine.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- For Mini-ITX builds
- Adorable
- Expensive

SPECS SIZE: SINGLE-TOWER / FANS: 1 / FAN MODEL: NF-A12X15 PWM / RGB LIGHTING: NO

Geekom A5 2025 edition

A small and budget-friendly PC that handles everyday tasks with ease.

There are a lot of mini computers available these days, from powerful gaming capable machines, to modest little machines. The Geekom A5 is an existing model, now updated for 2025, and aimed at anyone after an affordable tiny desktop. But how does it hold up in the real world?

While the 2025 A5 is also available with a more powerful Ryzen 7 5825U, our review unit rocks the 2023 Zen 3 Ryzen 5 7430U inside the compact 0.6-litre shell. While not the latest generation anymore, it's a solid low-to-mid-range chip with a 15W TDP, a 4.3GHz boost clock, and includes capable Radeon Vega 7 graphics clocked at 1800MHz. In the A5, it's paired with 16GB of DDR4-3200 RAM and a 512GB PCIe Gen3 NVMe SSD. Handily, the RAM sits in two easily accessible slots for upgrades up to 64GB (and it's easily accessible after via the bottom cover), and there's a spare 2.5in SATA bay for extra storage.

Ports are plentiful enough to keep most folks happy, with 2x USB-C 3.2 10Gbps (with DisplayPort), 3x USB-A 10Gbps (two on the front, one on the back), 1x USB 2.0 Type-A, 2x HDMI 2.0b, an SD card reader on the side, plus a 3.5mm headphone/mic jack.

Wireless duties are handled by Wi-Fi 6 (2.4 / 5GHz) and Bluetooth 5.2, and impressively, it also has a 2.5GbE LAN port. The A5 can drive an 8K display, or more usefully, four monitors via the HDMI ports, and DisplayPort out via the two USB-C connections. It's also VESA mountable.

If you were hoping for flashy AI tricks (or maybe to avoid them), look elsewhere – the A5 just delivers solid Windows 11



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
\$669

LINK
[geekom.au](https://www.geekom.au)

SPECS

W11 Pro; AMD Ryzen 5 7430U, Radeon Vega 7 iGPU; 16GB DDR4-3200 RAM; 512GB M.2 SSD; 2x USB-C 10Gbps, 3x USB-A 10Gbps, 1x USB-A 2.0, 2x HDMI 2.0b; 2.5G LAN, Wi-Fi 6, Bluetooth 5.2; 117 x 112 x 49 mm, 652 grams; 3-year warranty.

Pro performance without any CoPilot+ shenanigans to worry about.

Cooling is provided by Geekom's IceBlast 2.0 system that features dual copper heat pipes and a dedicated CPU plate. The setup keeps that CPU humming at near full tilt, with little to no throttling under most loads. It's audible when put to work, but for normal office apps or web browsing, the A5 is whisper-quiet.

In a head-to-head comparison with the NiPoGi E3B mini PC (also equipped with the Ryzen 5 7430U) the Geekom A5 superior cooling results in noticeably better results in most tests. While it's a lower-end machine, performance overall is perfectly good for everyday web browsing or office tasks, and the Vega 7 graphics can help accelerate certain workloads.

Changing the cooling to Performance mode in BIOS gives around an 8% improvement to multi-threaded scores

(but doesn't impact single core loads much) and only makes the A5 slightly noisier. If you need more grunt, the Ryzen 7 5825U has two extra cores and can be 10% or so faster in multi-threaded workloads and gives about 20% extra graphics performance.

At the time of writing, our reviewed machine had a discounted street price of \$439, but the RRP is \$669. If you want to grab the Ryzen 7 model, expect to pay at least \$499. While not an overtly powerful machine, when discounted the 2025 A5 offers a hard-to-beat mix of mini-PC price and punch.

Lindsay Handmer

PC PowerPlay

VERDICT

The Geekom A5 2025 edition punches above its weight, but it's the best value when picked up on special.

80

Indicates Best Result	PCMark 10 - Overall	Cinebench R24 - CPU (multi-threaded)	Cinebench R24 - CPU (single-threaded)	Geekbench 6 - Multi-core	Geekbench 6 - Single-core	Geekbench 6 - GPU	Fire Strike	3DMark Time Spy	Wild Life	Crystal DiskMark Read (MB/s)	Crystal DiskMark Write (MB/s)
Geekom A5 2025	5,687	433	81	6,472	1,945	14,503	3,541	1,372	7,633	3,529	3,096
NiPoGi E3B mini PC	5,368	429	81	7,187	1,899	12,065	3,021	1,261	4,928	4,382	3,785



Asus ROG Ryujin III 360 ARGB Extreme AIO

A next-level cooling solution for people who refuse to compromise on performance or style.

The ROG Ryujin III 360 ARGB Extreme doesn't just show up – it arrives in style, flaunting a 360 mm radiator, magnetic ARGB fans, black or white trim, and a 3.5-inch IPS display built right into the CPU block.

What's the downside? The rather eye-watering \$699 RRP of course, and street prices of at least \$579. That's a lot, especially when a less blingy but still very competent 360mm AIO cooler can be had for less than half the price. So it's fair to say that those interested in the ROG Ryujin III are not too worried about the cost, and think it's worth paying for premium style. With that in mind, how does it stack up?

For a start, it's not just a showpony, and underneath the bling is some premium engineering and a real focus on performance. The Ryujin III brings a copper CPU plate, a high-flow, low-noise Asetek 8th Gen V2 pump, an embedded VRM fan, thicker radiator fans and every Aura Sync LED customisation you could ask for via Armoury Crate. The trio of 120 mm magnetic ARGB fans are rated for 89.73 CFM at 2800 RPM with

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
\$579

LINK
[asus.com](https://www.asus.com)

SPECS

360mm aluminium radiator; 3x 120 mm Magnetic ARGB fans, 0-2800 RPM, 89.73 CFM; Asetek 8th Gen V2 pump; embedded VRM fan; 3.5in 480p IPS display; 400mm sleeved rubber tubing; Intel LGA 1851/1700/1200/115x & AMD AM5/AM4 compatibility; 399.5 × 120 × 30 mm; 6-year warranty.

5.15mmH₂O of pressure.

When eyeing up its glory on the testbench, one of the APC team suggested it's like showing up to a black-tie event in a bespoke tux with neon trim. In other words, you'll certainly stand out!

Installation is mostly painless, and the pre-installed Intel and AMD brackets cut mounting time, plus the block has CPU paste already applied. The magnetic daisy-chain fan connectors are both incredibly satisfying to clip together, and simplify cabling tremendously and give a very neat look. Overall, build quality is impeccable and the 400mm long sleeved tubing is supple and easy to route.

Connected up to our testbench with an Intel Core i9 14900K installed, the ROG Ryujin III kept temps below 42°C when gaming, and we saw a peak of 83°C during a stress test. When pushing further with an overclock, we saw up to 89°C. This is as good as, or better than, most similar AIO coolers, but it's not an earth-shattering difference. The VRM fan in the CPU block keeps air flowing over your motherboard components and

VRM heatsinks and does noticeably reduce temps compared to when it's disabled. At full tilt, the pump and fans are not exactly quiet, but for typical gaming level workloads (and mounted in a case), you likely won't notice the sound at all.

So what about aesthetics? The 3.5-inch LCD has a 640x480 resolution and a 60Hz refresh rate, and can show real-time stats like temps, clock frequencies and water flow, animations or a custom logo. It's inset into the cooling block a little, so it is easy to make it look a little more restrained, or, if you prefer, go all out with a vibrant animation.

It's worth noting that the Ryujin III isn't the flashiest Asus AIO cooler, and the ROG Ryuo IV SLC 360 knocks it up a notch with a 6.67in 2K curved display on the water block. *Lindsay Handmer*

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

It's an expensive cooler, no doubt, but for enthusiasts chasing peak performance and standout style, it's worth every cent.

90

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“Completely and utterly impolite”

Indulging my grimmest powergamer impulses in **BALDUR'S GATE III**

It's about that time of year again, gang – with Patch 8 of *Baldur's Gate III* dropping, I'm all-in on another honour mode run. In case you've not heard the great news, Larian's final patch added 12 new subclasses to the game alongside a whole bunch of new spells. And if you're familiar with 5th edition *Dungeons & Dragons* at all, you know the doom that's coming for the dread three: the Sorcadin.

Here's the concept: Paladins have access to an ability called Divine Smite, which lets them turn spell slots – magical power – into holy damage. The Sorcerer, a full-caster class, gets more of these slots to work with, at a higher level of power than Paladins do. A Sorcadin's turn, then, can include an absolutely massive Divine Smite and (with the Sorcerer's Quickened Spell metamagic) some actual spellcasting, too.

HARVEY RANDALL



THIS MONTH
I broke all my TTRPG taboos in the privacy of *Baldur's Gate III*.

ALSO PLAYED
Clair Obscur: Expedition 33,
Guilty Gear: Strive

This can take the form of a control spell like Hold Person, the terror of a Fireball, or even just another melee strike thanks to Patch 8 adding Booming Blade, which can be quickened to only cost a bonus action. Combine that with a one-level dip into the new Hexblade Warlock, which lets you combine your sword-swinging and spellcasting stats, and it's absolutely busted.

In a real-world D&D campaign, playing a Sorcadin is completely and utterly impolite, an act of betrayal I would never force upon a hardworking DM. A Sorcadin is incredibly tanky, has extreme burst damage, a nearly-full caster repertoire

of spells and excellent battlefield control. It's strong enough to pretty much kill the vibe of any campaign as you outshine your entire party.

But in the rigours and horrors of *Baldur's Gate III*'s hardest difficulty, played all by my lonesome, with no fellow adventurers to irritate and no DM to dismay? I'm indulging my deepest, darkest urges.

BIG BIG BURST

Something that helps assuage my guilt is the fact that *BGIII* is already filled with whacky builds that can bust the whole thing over its knee. 5e's suggestions for encounter difficulty are well and truly out the window. In Honour Mode especially, you're swarmed with hordes of

PLAYING A SORCADIN IS COMPLETELY IMPOLITE, AN ACT OF BETRAYAL



Of course I got the Everburn Blade from the tutorial. This ain't my first rodeo.

high-HP enemies that would mercilessly chew through any TTRPG group.

But for me, that's great, because I feel like far less of a munchkin. I'm not violating a social contract, agreed upon by four real-life friends. Instead, I'm defying uncaring and unflinching computer code designed to kill me dead at any opportunity. The game's a jerk, so I will become jerk incarnate.

Even then, I've felt touched by divine power in a way not even my dual-crossbow wielding Bard experienced. Inquisitor Ch'r'ai W'wargaz of the Githyanki Crèche, usually an Act 1 run-ender, folded in half when I crit, chewing through his HP with over 81 points of fury poured into a single strike.

Which begs the question: by leaning into my worst, most powergamey impulses, am I ruining the experience for myself? A boss with a challenging Legendary Action mechanic, something a developer at Larian worked hard on just for this difficulty mode, anti-climactically crumpled like a cardboard box. Is betraying my TTRPG principles in private leaving a stain upon my soul?

I don't know. But one thing's for certain: it feels good. ■



Use sunscreen, people!

"This is Star Wars done right"

Getting challenged at every step in **KOTOR 2**

ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Bickered with Kreia, and it was glorious.

ALSO PLAYED
Oblivion Remastered,
Doom: The Dark Ages

What's the height of Star Wars storytelling? The original trilogy? Ha, simplistic space cowboy nonsense that rips off Kurosawa shamelessly. The prequels? Surprisingly ambitious storytelling, if not particularly well executed. The sequel trilogy? A horrible car crash where all subtlety has been slain. No, the truth is, and always has been, the *Knights of the Old Republic* series of games. Why? Mature storytelling partnered with uncompromising ideological challenge.

Enter *KOTOR 2*, the weaker game of the pair but the one where the series' mastery of continuously presenting the player with ideological challenges is most piquant. Here is a game that presents you with constant decisions to be made, continuous moral and ethical dilemmas to be navigated and, unlike so much of Star Wars storytelling, is not afraid to make those choices grey, mature and difficult. What's more, it's then not afraid in any way to challenge you on your decision after you've made it, questioning you as to why you

chose that particular course of action, and having its supporting cast of characters disagree with you.

WEIRD SISTERS

Case in point, the game's two most memorable party characters, Kreia and Visas Maar. Not only are these characters some of the most interesting in Star Wars history, but they also lead the charge (especially Kreia) in constantly challenging you. You may be the lightsaber-wielding leader of this party of misfits, you may even be the chosen one who is set to bring balance to the force, but that doesn't mean they will just quietly fall into line behind you if they think you've made a bad decision or have flawed thinking.

Kreia in particular wages a one-woman war against simplistic storytelling and a black and white view of morality. Quotes like, "I cannot force you to listen to reason, only hope that you will grow past these infantile delusions of right and wrong," show not just her ability to challenge the player, but Obsidian Entertainment's commitment to elevate Star Wars storytelling and build immersion through challenge. This is Star Wars done right. ■



“As you unlock new librarians, you’re going to need a lot of cards”

Though it does itself no favours, **LIBRARY OF RUINA** presents a stacked deck I just can’t resist

Truth told, I didn’t really get on with *Blue Prince*; the spatial aspect to the puzzling combined with the lightest whiff of randomisation frustrated me rather than pushed me forward. Still, that doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy banging my head against a brick wall now and again.

Library of Ruina is part visual novel, and part digital card-and-dice game. As my stable of brutal bibliophiles slaughter combative guests and get slaughtered in equal measure, I’m fairly certain I’ve found a real page-turner just for me... even if some of the challenge stems from straight up obfuscation.

Brief text-based tutorials leave a lot to be desired, but thankfully book bashes spell either victory or defeat quickly enough you’ll want to go again. Say you’re up against a nightmarish Abnormality – a monstrous gimmick encounter that, once cleared, offers optional buffs for future battles. The Happy Teddy Bear always rolls high, meaning it can easily knock the stuffing right out of your librarians before you even have a

JESS KINGHORN



THIS MONTH
Had a heart-to-heart with a brick wall.

ALSO PLAYED
Two Point Museum,
Slitterhead

chance to punt it back into the toy box. A way to level the playing field – either by lowering your enemy’s dice pool, raising your own, or going all out on dealing the only damage type dear old Teddy is weak to – lies in experimenting with your deck.

PIPE DREAM

You’re never allowed to get too comfortable with a single deck. Besides a wealth of card effects to mix and match, the game has no qualms about repeatedly knocking you flat on your arse to get you to rethink strategy. My wins haven’t all

been elegant executions, with my book keepers looking pretty battered by the end – but they are still mine.

Chunks of story and ensuing clashes reward you with new books that you can then burn for funky fresh cards. It’s basically a gacha system that doesn’t make you pay the late fee upfront – or any real world money, for that matter.

Now, if you’ve read this far, you’ll note I’ve not said a jot about the story. That’s in part because there’s a thematic drip, drip, drip you should soak up yourself, but also, as someone who hasn’t played any of developer Project Moon’s other games, this title surprised me in the best way.

For one thing, head librarian Angela voices a distaste for indirect chatter early on, making for snappy visual novel sequences while also not giving the entire game away. That said, *Library of Ruina*’s world is most compellingly marked by a casual brutality that’s difficult to look away from; here, everyone is a butcher, a hired killer, or worse – and they’re all just trying to make ends meet. Even with its more repetitive passages, it all makes for a tale I’m not yet willing to close the book on. ■

YOU’RE NEVER ALLOWED TO GET TOO COMFORTABLE WITH A SINGLE DECK



FAR LEFT: The slippery turn ordering means that sometimes who moves first isn’t as important as what you do after.

LEFT: The art can be a little scrappy, but *Library of Ruina*’s rough edges just make me like it all the more.



Why don't I ever get invited to parties like this? Oh yeah. I'm not a yakuza.

“Nothing says ‘don’t notice me’ like fighting 14 people at once..”

Undercover in **LIKE A DRAGON GAIDEN: THE MAN WHO ERASED HIS NAME**

It's quite the challenge stepping away from a *Yakuza* game, even for a short time. When you're in the full flow of it, it's magnificent, distracting, all consuming. All that matters in the next fight, substory, or absurd story beat. You can't remember a time when you weren't battering goons with bikes and replenishing your health with ramen. Stop playing for even a week, however, and coming back to it is bewildering. You find yourself smoking on an oil rig repurposed as a coliseum frequented by sociopathic proto-Musks, dressed in a gold suit, with only the most basic concepts of who betrayed who, when, and why. It's all part of the process though.

To be fair, *The Man Who Erased His Name* is even more convoluted than most *Yakuza* games, but it's actually by design. Kiryu, after the events of *Yakuza 6*, has essentially faked his death and reappeared as Joryu, a secret agent employed by the Japanese government. Aside from the

MATT ELLIOTT



THIS MONTH
Snapped shots of men in iridescent pants.

ALSO PLAYED
Death Stranding,
Old Skies, *Split Fiction*

fact that 'Joryu' is close to 'Kiryu', he hasn't made much effort to disguise himself, instead opting for the Clark Kent method of just wearing glasses. And despite this, most people recognise him by his fighting style, rather than the fact he's still a large, statuesque man with a voice like gravel in a velvet bag. I also don't think you'd ever find a protagonist less concerned with remaining incognito; nothing says 'don't notice me' like fighting 14 people at once while wearing rocket shoes.

KIRYU HAS ESSENTIALLY FAKED HIS DEATH AND REAPPEARED AS JORYU

POCKET RACER

It's absurd stuff, even by *Yakuza* standards. But there's still time for the emotionally charged stuff. At the start, Kiryu has abandoned everyone he loves to keep them safe. He's trapped in an existence he hates. And even though he's rarely one for histrionics, you can still see him suffering. It also helps that game dovetails so elegantly with *Like a Dragon*. I played the games in order, and Kiryu's reveal was enough to make me crave more of his backstory.

The open secret about the series is that it's not really about drone attacks and walloping wild animals. The stuff I remember and love is Saijima breaking down after a fight; Majima stoically watching his life change in slow motion before his eye; Ichiban learning the truth about his past. And *The Man Who Erased His Name* is rich with these moments, as well as smaller, sillier ones that still manage to land. Even at a reduced length, *Like a Dragon Gaiden* lands one of the most emotionally resonant Tiger Drops to the heart that you could hope for from a spin-off. ■



The kangaroo with boxing gloves has breached containment and is now hopping between games.

STREETS OF RAGE X

Revisiting the 16-bit era with some added punch. *By Justin Wagner*

It doesn't take much time to pick your average beat-'em-up clean – even *Streets of Rage*, inarguably among the best games in the genre, is about an hour long regardless of which entry you pick up. The fun is in replaying it over and over, getting through with fewer and fewer continues, and roping your friends in for some co-op button mashing; but even so, every well runs dry eventually. Until rogue fans step in, of course.

Streets of Rage X is an OpenBOR recreation of the 16-bit *Streets of Rage* games by developer Kratus which makes those originals feel minuscule. Each game from the Mega Drive trilogy is a mere 'route' on offer here, with each character previously unique to each game now playable in any of them. "But

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 2, 1991

PUBLISHER
Sega

DEVELOPER
Sega

LINK
streets4rage.com

what about game balance?" I hear you retort; where we're going, we don't need it.

FLAIR KNUCKLE

Combat has seen a ludicrous, maximalist overhaul that feels inspired by *Streets of Rage 4*'s triple-digit juggling combos. You can chain a few hits together in the Genesis games and even score infinite combos with techniques that feel like borderline exploits, but you can keep an enemy trapped in hit stun so long you'll rarely need anything all that extravagant. On the other hand, *X* is so dedicated to form, function's been chucked out a window.

This giant purple guy isn't playable, unfortunately.



FLEXOTERICA

Meet the lesser-known playable fighters



BIG BEN

Big Ben is a real nuisance in the main game due to his inexplicable ability to breathe fire, but now you're free to take out your frustrations by doing it yourself.



ROO

Roo is a kangaroo with boxing gloves and apparent combat training. As if they needed any help to flatten their opponents.



ROCKET

Rocket has a jetpack, which makes me wonder how Mr X's crime syndicate is funded. I might go rogue too, in his shoes; what benefit could outdo a jetpack?



SOUTHER

Souther might look like Freddy Krueger with his red sweater and gnarled face, but he sets himself apart by wearing gloves with big claws on them.



ABOVE: Fine. If the rest isn't ridiculous enough for you, here's a mech.

RIGHT: New damage and hit counters make the science of street brawling all the more exact.



You can string together attacks like it's nothing, and the addition of new super attacks, air grabs, charge attacks and specials takes a game that used to be about careful crowd control and turns it into a combo-fiend sandbox. Most of these additions can be turned off if you'd rather play the game as it was, but it still benefits from the game's suite of video and sound settings and an optional CPU co-op partner.

There's also new defensive options like the dodge roll, parry, guard, and counter attack, which soup up brawls even further. Some of these options aren't present even in the average modern beat 'em up, and they help *Streets of Rage* feel less like a clunky relic of the '90s and more like the storm of haymakers on display in the original game's box art.

Again, it's certainly overkill at first; the game doesn't amp up the difficulty nearly enough to make all this styling on street punks necessary, and it feels a bit like playing *NBA Jam* as a pair of blokes from *Guilty Gear*. But once you start clearing the game, you'll start to unlock difficulty modifiers which toy with enemy behaviour and quantity. You can also fine-tune your available continues and customise your access to most combat moves on an individual basis, making it easy to hit and get hit exactly as hard as you're comfortable with.

CHOOSE YOUR FIGHTER

If that wasn't enough, *Streets of Rage X* packs in two original modes with further tricks up their sleeves: survival and rebellion. Survival is your typical wave defence affair, letting you hone your juggling skills without the hassle of walking to the right, though the option to turn it into a boss rush or a hectic free-for-all is welcome.

Rebellion, though, is probably the game's most tantalising addition. Much like in the story mode, you select a *Streets of Rage* game to play through and select your fight, but just about any character from the original games is playable. And I truly mean any. Play as original final boss Mr X, a kangaroo in boxing gloves, a mech with attached missile launchers – if they appeared as a sprite in the Mega Drive games, they're playable here with their own unique moves, bringing the roster to a whopping 66. Even comparatively

massive beat 'em ups scarcely offer more playable characters than there are seats on the arcade cabinet, making this perhaps the most ludicrous feature on offer. These roster-stuffers play exactly how you might expect they would, drawing on whatever capabilities and animations they have in the base game, and it gave me a new appreciation for each individual sprite I used to thoughtlessly bowl over. I mean, that's still what I'm doing, but now practically anyone can have a turn in the driver's seat.

Not every character in *Rebellion* is as robust as the main cast, with some NPC movesets being decidedly one-note or awkward to handle (most low-level goons are like this). But the option is a riotous novelty, and gunning down droves of mobsters as their very own kingpin



SQUEEZING EVERY DROP OF POTENTIAL OUT OF ITS FIGHTERS

is a deliriously silly remix of the original game's action. The game is feature-rich and customisable in a way the average emulator can't match, squeezing every last drop of potential out of its cast of fighters, most of which previously existed only to get wailed on.

And if you have no interest in any of this, preferring the games in their original incarnations without all these bells and whistles, it's still a PC native recreation of three games which just got delisted from Steam along with the rest of the Sega Mega Drive and Genesis Classics collection. More than a kitchen-sink embellishment on the games, it's also just a handy work of preservation.

It's cliché at this point to call tributes like *Streets of Rage X* a love letter to the original work, but it's hard to sum this remake up any other way. Maybe the original trio is showing its age, but the passion on display in projects like these – which emphasise the action as you might remember it, rather than as it actually was – buoys old favourites with a wellspring of new ways to play on modern hardware. ■



INJUSTICE 2'S STORY MODE

A fighting game you play for the plot *By Jody Macgregor*



FAR LEFT: How is Gorilla Grodd's breastplate attached? Gorilla glue.

RIGHT: This cat is history's greatest villain.



Who would win in a fight? Comics writers know this is what fans argue about and feed those arguments with crossovers and stories like *Batman vs Superman*. Usually it's naff stuff where characters just biff each other for a bit and then form a getalong gang as if they weren't battering each others' faces in just five minutes ago.

The developers of *Mortal Kombat* obviously weren't going to do anything so weak sauce. In the *Injustice* games, Superman's gone full evil and started a tyrannical regime straight-up called The Regime, which Batman leads a resistance against. The inciting incident of the whole storyline kills off Lois Lane and the Joker, and it gets wilder from there. By the time of *Injustice 2*, Superman has been imprisoned for his crimes, Clock King's had his daft head blown up, Green Arrow's been killed and replaced by a version from a dimension where his wife died instead, and Gorilla Grodd's taken over Gorilla City in a bloody coup.

All that's only relevant in story mode, of course, and story modes aren't normally the reason people play fighting games – except for *Tekken*'s agreeably insane one. Usually, though, fighting games struggle to tell a story because they've got so many characters to work with. But comic books have been managing it for decades, and *Injustice 2* simply steals that format. In the DC Universe, everyone already has a reason to fight everyone.

Weirdly, the plot's a lot like *Suicide Squad*: Kill the Justice League.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2017

DEVELOPER
NetherRealm Studios

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros

LINK
warnerbros.com

WHO CREW

Lesser-known stars of *Injustice 2*



GRID

A robot clone of Cyborg possessed by a sentient virus AI.



DOCTOR FATE

Archaeologist Kent Nelson wears a magic helmet called Nabu.



REVERSE-FLASH

A time-travelling criminal from the future.



CHEETAH

Anthropologist Barbara Minerva, cursed to be Catwoman 2.0.

Superman's a villain, Harley Quinn's a hero and Brainiac's the final boss. Only in this version of events, Kevin Conroy's Batman is also on the side of the angels – well, if Harley and Catwoman count as angels – and you only have to defeat Brainiac once until Warner Bros runs out of seasonal content to sell you.

STORY MODES AREN'T THE REASON PEOPLE PLAY FIGHTING GAMES

SUPER CAST

The performances are great thanks to facial animation that was ahead of its time and voice acting by the likes of Jeffrey Combs from *Re-Animator* as Brainiac, Robert Englund from *Nightmare on Elm Street* as Scarecrow, Alan Tudyk from *Firefly* as Green Arrow and Laura Bailey from *Critical Role* and basically 50% of all videogames as Supergirl.

Moments that could be ridiculous are embraced and handled straight, such as Harley getting a double dose of fear toxin, and hallucinating her greatest fear, which is the Joker coming back and convincing her to revert to the villainous sidekick she used to be. The same goes for Superman and Batman's final confrontation, where they reminisce about the old times before punching each other about the head and face for several minutes.

Where it gets properly over-the-top is in the fights, where suddenly characters can hurl each other into orbiting satellites or through the Earth's crust without anyone dying. The Flash has a super move where he runs so fast he travels back in time, dragging his opponent to distant epochs, before returning to the moment before he left so he can throw them at themselves.

CARRY ON CAMPAIGN

You go from that to fairly subdued scenes where Green Lantern regrets the fact he initially sided with The Regime and struggles with his anger issues. Then his rage manifests in the form of a Red Lantern whose sidekick is a cat that vomits blood, and also you're in Atlantis at the time. The dial swings between the sublime and the absolutely bugfuck as quickly as it does in comic books, with as much cheerful disdain for tonal consistency as professional wrestling.

The one downside of *Injustice 2* is that if you were depressed about Wonder Woman getting screwed out of a solo game now Warner Bros is closing *Monolith*, unfortunately she doesn't get her due here, being reduced to Superman's second banana. But apart from her and Superman becoming fascists it's full of bang-on portrayals of its huge roster, including the first version of Harley Quinn to not annoy me. Anyway, the answer to 'who would win in a fight' is Swamp Thing. ■



RIGHT: Was he born Brainiac or is he owning a schoolyard insult? You know, like Meat Loaf?



IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCPP INVESTIGATOR

Dick Ray-Tracing is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else will. This month's case: **THE FINAL PWN**

I woke in a pool of sweat, my heart racing, in my bed at the Englischer Hof inn in Meiringen, Switzerland. I'd dreamt of Betty Sue's suicide again, the young woman I'd failed to save from the Console Gaming Collective. "Dick, we've gotta stop meeting like this," she'd said. And now I saw her in my dreams over and over again, pulling the trigger, falling forever...

I needed to numb the pain. The store down the street from the inn was open, and while the shopkeeper raised an eyebrow at a foreigner buying Scotch before noon, I emerged with that relief. The market town nestled in the Bernese Highlands was growing with life as I set off to my dead drop point, an antique donations box at Meiringen's famous English Church. According to an encrypted transcript I'd recovered from the CGC operation in Canterbury, it was here proof of my assassination would be filed, and I intended to see who came to collect.

I glanced across the road, and a woman was arranging flowers outside her stall, bunches of Edelweiss and Alpenrose. A man walking a Schweizer Laufhund passed by, nodding curtly. A group of schoolchildren, led by a bespectacled middle-aged woman, were ushered across the road at a crossing, the early morning sun warmly illuminating their cow-hide satchels. And then, all of a sudden, I felt it – I'd got a tail. Without changing my pace I took a left down a side street, passing a workshop, then a right, stopping side-on for a second while pretending to tie my shoelace. Nobody came.

I continued, took a right through a parking lot, and then, after doubling back, I ducked into a pedestrian underpass. But as I went to emerge from the tunnel, a voice suddenly echoed out: "Dick Ray-Tracing, you're a hard man to kill, I'll grant you that. But I see you're still as predictable as ever when it comes around to tradecraft, and now you've walked into my trap." I turned and watched as Larry Pickwick, the obscenely wealthy former major game publisher CEO, slowly walked towards me with a big, Cheshire Cat-like grin upon his face.

"Pickwick, I should've known," I said, noting that five CGC goons now blocked the tunnel's other exit. "You're the second leader of the CGC!" "Oh Dick," said Pickwick, "you're so slow it's funny. I merely wanted the world to think I'd left the gaming industry after selling out for hundreds of millions of dollars. But I've got a calling, Dick. I exist solely to take the fun out of videogames and, as you're just so funny, I'm afraid that means you're going to have to be taken out, too."

...UNTIL SEP 1



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GAME PASS

XBOX SERIES X|S



BATTLETNET



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